

# THE WAR FOR WORLD POWER

by  
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Le matériel ne vaut que  
par ceux qui l'utilisent.

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To M.  
but for whom this book would never have  
been written





## *Preface*

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**T**his book is an attempt to provide a survey of the war that will commend itself to the majority of intelligent readers as giving the significant events of that great struggle. I have not attempted to give a detailed story even where, for certain reasons, it would have been possible to do so. Long detailed accounts are certain to appear sooner or later and find their level; but no such record could appear at present, and what it is possible to publish must be arbitrary and selective

The same is true, of course, of the present book, but here it is the essence of the design and not the result of lack of material. There are numerous episodes which, however simple in their lines, simply bristle with the sort of detail that heartens and inspires. There are others which have from their nature an isolated and hidden character. There were battles in Poland which certainly cannot find a fully detailed record yet and may never achieve one. Like the manoeuvres of the French Meuse Army in May, they were moulded into a number of engagements with no precise form or locus, so that it was possible for a Commander rejoining his troops to step from a tank into the midst of Germans. Such battles appear to have resembled the guerilla tactic of distant wars rather than the formal clashes of recent history.

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Such warfare does not lend itself easily to detailed description unless one should be content to describe the confusion without the thread. In any case that kind of story has little interest for me and I think what many wish to discover is how the parts of this moving design fit together and what role they played in the unfolding picture.

As I see it, the war is explicable and intelligible only on the assumption that it represents an attack on the world and its liberties by Herr Hitler. It differs from earlier German aggressions not in its *material*, but in its *ideal* scope. *World-power or downfall* is the title of a German book published before the Great War and it is the fact that Germany was in occupation of a greater part of Europe in July 1918 than in July 1940. These outbreaks appear to represent a sort of recurrent fever and to have a limitless character that distinguishes them from other wars.

But the present war is fought on so many fronts that the chronicler has perforce to be selective. Even so, it is not easy to see the exact relevance of the various moves made by Germany. Herr Hitler has attempted in public to assign them definite values; but his indifference to truth is such that his estimates may mean no more than a mood, depressed or hysterical, of the moment.

Somehow all this kaleidoscopic scene must be brought to a focus, given a value and a meaning; and though the values here are arbitrary and personal, I think they present a coherent picture. The military events alone are inexplicable. Jomini used a description which, though well worn, has still its use. 'War', he said, 'is a fearful and impassioned drama'; and it is impossible altogether to detach the various campaigns and battles from their background in the social development of our time. It is in this respect that the present war differs in its ideal scope from all others, except the

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religious wars. Herr Hitler is not aiming merely at the defeat of this or that nation, from whom he will exact indemnities in cash or territory, he is not even attempting a new Versailles *dictat*. Versailles at best or worse, only designed the handcuffs and left the prisoners to the consolations of Lovelace.

Herr Hitler's real objective is a complete social and political revolution and the war cannot be understood unless that is grasped. How to get all this into a book of such a size has been the problem I cannot think many people desire to read a library to understand what is afoot, any more than I should myself. The problem has been one of selection and though this is common to all books, it grows with the complexity of the picture and the scale of reduction.

Part of the difficulty has been overcome through a constant preoccupation with the war from the beginning. Compelled to write at least one article weekly, and sometimes two or three, it has been impossible to avoid facing the many problems of the war; and there is a certain value in being forced to bear them in mind for a considerable space of time.

At the end, it is an arbitrary picture, but I hope that some of those who have read my periodical surveys, both here and abroad, will find in it the same independence and perhaps a measure of value. In the broad saliences, in the significance that I attempt to give here, I have changed my view very little from the beginning, and in many important aspects what was novel and unpopular at first has now found popular support. In that respect I think I can say, as a distinguished American writer has said, 'Let the record stand.'

It is because so much that I have written, week by week,

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has passed from the tentative or the rejected to the received, that I have indulged in further speculations here. In at least one direction, the development of air warfare, I think it more than possible that my views will turn out to be correct. At all events I have set them down without apology, and trust they will be read with interest.

In writing this book I have naturally received much help, some of which I should wish to acknowledge. If I do not set down names it is because I do not wish to involve anyone in responsibility for views and values which are purely personal.

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## Introduction

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**T**he issue raised by the German Führer is now clear. He has set out on an expedition in the Alexandrian manner to conquer the world. It is not less than that, though the realization has come very gradually, and intelligent people are driven to accept it in spite of what seems its absurdity by the standards of everyday. It is an idea into which the monstrous enters so largely that it would be easier to regard it as a grotesque, a deliberate or fanciful caricature of the truth. This was, in fact, the first reaction to the conclusion of those who maintained what is now something of a commonplace. It is impossible any longer to evade the conviction, that it is this tendency to the enormous and the grandiose that distinguishes the German. The French regard him as fundamentally *démesuré*, and we can trace this drift to the extreme in many directions. On investigation it will be recognized that the German invents very little, but develops much.

In no direction, however, is this tendency more marked than in warfare. The tank was a purely English invention. The use of the tank with accompanying aeroplanes was an English development. The Germans merely built hordes of all sorts of tanks, bigger and stronger, constructed thousands of aeroplanes and trained the pilots to act with the

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tanks. Similarly, the tactics of infiltration came from a French captain in the Great War. They have been immensely developed by the Germans, who, however, have not added a single idea to the original conception. The defensive in depth is another French idea the Germans fostered and developed. Raising things to the *nth* seems to be the characteristic German tendency.

So too in the matter of the Army. They must have an army of gigantic size, armed most lavishly with ten or a hundred times the equipment used elsewhere. They must not only have *Lebensraum*, but only the world will suffice to supply it. How difficult it is for normal people to grasp this fact, but at least it should not seem incredible if, as many are driven to conclude, the Germans are in fact essentially *démesuré*.

It will be noticed that the words 'Hitler' and 'Germans' have been used indifferently to mean the same thing. Surely to-day some dawning of that truth must have come to everyone who can appreciate evidence. That everyone knows kindly, charming, modest, industrious Germans is completely irrelevant. If we carefully study the stimuli to which these kindly, normal-seeming men and women react most readily, it will be found to be the call to military adventure. It has happened repeatedly in the last two hundred years. They seem to be living like ordinary peaceful human beings; but when they hear the voice of the sergeant and the sound of the drum, they fall in with almost obvious relief where the French would deafen the air with arguments one way or the other and the English would resist almost to the death.

There is this deep, abiding difference between the races, the difference which drives the German to chose such names as 'Wotan' or 'Siegfried' for their 'walls' where the

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French bestow on their defences the name of the sergeant in whose head the idea was born. Not for the Germans anything so modest and normal as a private soldier; nothing less than a god can be appropriate to a German creation. The same contrast is seen in the communiqués. The German reports represent them as always 'annihilating', 'encircling', 'pursuing', having 'blood-baths' or something *démesuré*, something which corresponds to no normal category, something terrific, godlike. This is no passing phase; it has always been so with the Germans, before there was any Hitler or even a Kaiser Wilhelm II. It is a sort of endemic disease which drives them to strut about in the absurd goose-step that stands in so sharp a contrast to that business-like, indescribable shuffle of the *fantassin*, or the merely human straight and stiff march of British troops. Siegfried, the god-aping, and Maginot, the invincibly human type that has walked about his village and drunk his *apéritif* across France for generations. These are convincingly typical of the attitudes of the Germans and French; and as for the British they are content to be thought of as muddlers who somehow contrive when closing-time comes to be sober and steady when the opponent is distraught and drunk either with wine or with his own glory.

The march of the French Republican band is stirring and infectious with human defiance; and the same is true in its own way with British martial music. German music slumps back into the sentimentality that normally holds this malleable nature, or leaps to the clouds.

This pretence to the superhuman and godlike on the part of the German is an historic fact. In a Polish newspaper at the beginning of June 1940 there is a report of a conversation between a German-speaking Polish officer and a German officer in which the latter discusses the German vic-

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tories and insists that they are no more than a means to an end—the 'regeneration' of the country to a greater Germany, 'barbarian and powerful', in which the Germans will be purified of the pettiness and weakness of 'Judaean-Christian culture'. He maintains that the driving force in Germany is the pursuit of the 'spiritual' and only when this is realized will other nations be able to grasp the 'superhuman qualities' of the German people and the 'divinity' of Hitler.

There is a peril in drawing conclusions from a single instance; but if single, this instance is far from singular: it is typical. An article in the *National Zeitung* three years ago (3rd June of 1937) said 'God has revealed himself not in Jesus Christ, but in Adolf Hitler'; and, making every allowance for the particular newspaper in which that statement appeared, it does not seem permissible to conclude that it is anything more than a slight exaggeration of the prevalent mood.<sup>1</sup>

A litany has even been written to Hitler—

*'There are so many who have never stood in thy presence.  
But for them thou art the Saviour still——'*<sup>2</sup>

This conception of themselves as a superhuman race with some sort of 'divinity' is never far from the surface of German consciousness and it tends to justify all means as well as all ends. Faith between Germans is sacred; but it is virtue to keep no faith with the non-German. Lying and truth are indifferent pawns to be used as occasion suggests. The big lie is tactically the better since mankind is so constituted that it is more readily credited.

Human nature, normal civilized human nature, is a truth—

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from *The Voice of the Nazi*, by W. A. Sinclair (p. 55).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56

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keeping entity. It may have its lapses, it may put the best face it can on any given matter, but it is normally truthful and trustful. It is these characteristics Hitler depends on for the success of lying. If all men were liars, there would be no faith placed in anybody's word and civilized intercourse would be impossible.

Hitler is embarked on an expedition to conquer the world and transform its society. He has already established about him a twofold standard of behaviour. He will exact truth, but never pay it. He believes that he belongs to a chosen race and his purpose is to set its foot upon the necks of the rest of the world; but in that race he has established a hierarchy and this insists that others shall tell it the truth though it will only tell the truth to subordinates or the slave races when it is more advantageous to do so. Rigid obedience must replace mutual confidence in holding civilization together.

In such a state, liberty has no place; and in fact, Hitler assures to everyone only the liberty to serve and obey. The appalling, the obscene brutalities which have marked his administration of Germany almost pass belief. The rubber truncheon and the multiplied tortures of his concentration camps are almost less shocking than his manipulation of youth to have no desires beyond willing service and to be prepared for all crimes, even the betrayal of one's parents in that service. The milder, more humane and loyal virtues are sedulously weeded out; and by this elaborate frustration of anatomy he is attempting to produce a new race. His crude assumption is that he possesses the best raw material, providing the moulding hand of the right potter retains the shaping of it.

His external policy is similarly self-regarding. He has seen that normal mankind does not want wars; and his

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scheme for the complete subjugation of Europe and mankind would, if successful, assure peace. At present, his object appears to be the sharing of European and African control with two other Powers. He hopes to be the residuary legatee of the British Empire; and, content for a short space to share world dominion with Italy, Russia and perhaps Japan, he undoubtedly conceives his allies settling down into a hierarchical pattern under himself.

The terrible danger is the failure to realize that his schemes have a fair chance of success. He has been able to assure better conditions to his people than Russia, and no federal scheme for Europe has, at present, as much chance of spreading the reign of peace over the Continent as has his imposed authority. He offers, in fact, solutions; and their monstrous character should not blind us to their reality. They face the actual problems and find answers appropriate to his general outlook. He is prepared for wholesale massacres of men, women and children, such as those in Poland and Rotterdam. He sees no need to justify them, but he admits the conviction that terror and brutality in war are eminently justified as ensuring its speedy end. His philosophy is completer than any that exists outside Christianity.

So great is the hatred that his philosophy and his plan excite among the vast majority of democratic peoples that they prove completely incapable of assessing both at anything like their true value. The European nations cannot continue for ever to tolerate periodic interruptions of the peace and the disturbance of all normal activities until the war is over. To nations which have come to that conclusion Herr Hitler can offer almost certain peace. He will exact as payment universal military service; but he will so organize gigantic armies that war will be most unlikely and if it should come it will cause as little disturbance as possible.

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during its continuance and will be brought to a successful issue. If this should seem a counsel of despair, a policy of ordering one's whole life on the basis of insurance, it must be realized that Europe has within twenty-five years seen two wars which have produced untold suffering and shaken it from end to end.

Western democracy with its long tradition of liberty can only regard the whole conception as monstrous, as a species of living death. It seems not only odious, but a return to the primitive and pagan level. The war, then, is a clash of rival conceptions. This is true, of course, of all wars, but here the design is more clearly stamped. It is, moreover, a clash between rival conceptions of fundamentals, of the very essence of life, between an outlook which regards human liberty and all that it implies in personal fulfilment and the more modest joys as immaterial, and another which is prepared to face surface unevennesses and even risks for the sake of assuring to mankind the largest enjoyment of it.

This clash has been developing for some years, possibly since the great War. Its bannerets were fluttering on distant horizons even before that terrible struggle; and the battle, like most wholly human conflicts, has developed in a confused way so that it has not always been obvious upon which side the soldiers fought. Some of those who should have had the sun on their banners have, at times, appeared to be fighting, uninspired, in the dark.

Yet it is strange how the peoples have engaged. Hitler has set his legions on the march with a copious draught of sheer lying. He has laid down in *Mein Kampf* that, in any case, they would not understand his objectives. It is for the leader to plan and direct, and for the masses to obey. So he selected the motive he most favours as a driving force—hate, and instilled it by massive lying about envious, unjust,

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treacherous enemies who threaten the peaceful German's life. On the other side, the democracies, at least as incapable of understanding Hitler's design, have grasped the gist of the conflict, more, probably, from the unconscious promptings of a long tradition of developing liberty than from any anxious reasoning. But it is because the conviction has come in this way that it has come so late.

It is often said that democracies are more suited to peace than to war. The very opposite is the case. In war they are capable of sacrifices and devotion which seem almost incredible. They will sacrifice what they hold most dear, what, indeed, is the quality that differentiates them from all other forms of government, they will sacrifice even liberty. They will preserve a discipline unshakable in face of every test, a calm stolidity in every suffering, and a grim tenacity that will outlast the formidable attack of any autocracy. They will improvise, organize and slave to prime the guns. They have done it once before, they are doing it again.

No, it is not in war the democracies show their insufficiency; it is in peace. It is because the normal human being hates war, it is because he asks so little of life that when peace comes he drops his gun, abandons all sense of discipline or loyalty and deafens the air with discussion. He will not believe that anyone threatens his liberty. The provision he will make for war is only sufficient to irritate and not to protect. His hatred of war is such that he readily transfers it to armies and will have none of them in time of peace. This at least, is true of Britain where men's brains are in their emotions. Jaurès believed in universal service. He saw nothing in the least undemocratic in 'a nation in arms'; and, indeed, there can hardly be anything more democratic in idea. Jaurès saw nothing in it militarist or challenging to peace. He was a socialist, and it was in the name of the



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workers he demanded 'that the nation should organize all its military forces, irrespective of class or caste, for the sole purpose of national defence.'

Lack of logic and a less troubled history have made this, which is so commonplace to Continental nations, hateful to Britain. It is in time of peace that wars are fought; and democracies suffer from a fatal time-lag. They will never make sufficient provision for defence until the time when attack has proved it almost too late. The present war was being shaped from the year 1936 onwards when the Western democracies were engrossed in other attractions, in attractions to which, indeed, all sensible people yield.

It is difficult for the sort of man Maginot was to spend his best activities in devising methods of killing his fellow-man, even if it be the German whose jackboot has trampled down his vineyards so many times, except under the compulsion of defence. Even in that extremity, he will find it hard to bring himself to dealing out death with the lavish measure his opponent uses. He faces with reluctance taking the initiative in attack. And yet this attitude means that he will be *compelled* to attack and will in the end see his victory rising upon a mountain of corpses. His characteristic attitude, the erection of defence into a sort of sacrament, will, in time of crisis, unfit him for that last imperative duty.

Is there any need to trace the ramifications of this clash further? The more responsible, more reflective, more emotional product of democracy will only take to war when his profound reluctance has immersed him in it upon the most unfavourable terms. The Hitler youth, whatever be his natural desire, will march to the whistle. During the war it was seen how deeply this war discipline had been ingrained in him. From the Great War, from a foreigner as usual, the German staff had drawn the tactics of infiltration, and with

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characteristic logic and thoroughness they developed the idea to the utmost. On its passive as well as on its active side this form of tactics involved a discipline trained to function almost like a faith.

In general the idea is to attack the weaker, instead of the strong point of the enemy's position. But in action it meant going straight ahead through the hostile line, ignoring the strong points, but pressing on where the resistance gives way. This, of course, involves courage of the highest order and the utmost faith in the command. On its passive side, it involves the complete cessation of attack, when the advance seemed likely to be costly, and the waiting for assistance before attempting to resume the advance. During the war it involved, in fact, the appearance of cowardice. At times the Germans advanced so solidly and persistently against British machine-guns, which yield to little else than artillery, that it seemed that they must be hypnotized; it seemed impossible to understand how they could continue to walk to death. At other times they gave way to fierce bayonet charges.

The Germans had given their whole minds to war for some years. Every energy had been directed to that one end. Equipment of all sorts had been accumulated. Even when food was short nothing was grudged this Moloch. Aeroplanes were built in such numbers that at the outbreak of the war, Germany had more than twice the first line of strength of Britain, France and Italy. Armoured divisions were organized under Guderian, their famous specialist. Mobile and heavy artillery were accumulated, and every sort of cunning device was prepared, but in no direction was this immense activity more marked than in the study and practice of various forms of tactics. A nation's mind was spent upon the practical study of war.

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Like the French, Germany had constructed an elaborate series of frontier fortifications in the west. But the purpose of these fortifications was entirely different: the Maginot Line was a system of fortified points designed for resistance. In theory, it had the role of protecting the mobilization and acting as a launching platform for attack; but constructed with the design of providing a sure defensive against German attack it came in time to colour and control the whole French strategy. The 'Siegfried Line' or West Wall, on the other hand, was never meant by the German Staff to be other than a flank cover while the armies were engaged on some other front. It was, in fact, an insurance against a war on two fronts. But the Germans never for a moment yielded to the attractions of the defensive. They do not take well to it; and, in fine, it has no attractions for them.

The battle, then, was joined with the opposing armies in an immensely different state of preparation. The allies were immobilized; but it was soon apparent that not only were they grossly deficient in *matériel* as compared with Germany, but they were also entirely deficient in the spirit which alone promises victory, the spirit of the offensive. It was not realized for many months, when sad experience made it all too clear, that obsession with the defensive, in the final resort, develops incapacity for defence. But before that fact was recognized the outlines of the protagonists had been made crystal clear in a thousand actions, speeches, reserves and limitations. The opposition between the god-aping and the entirely human being was complete.

## CHAPTER 1

### *The Outbreak of War*

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Friday, September the 1st, rose with that gracious loveliness that seems to be characteristic of an English autumn. It had been ushered in by a splendid summer and many fair days followed it. But it cannot be said that the people of Britain were as fully conscious of their good fortune in this matter as they might have been in another year. On that day amazing events were taking place within her borders as well as far away to the east, in the European continent. For on that day war broke out across the Polish frontiers. But in Britain this was not known until later in the day and the morning was taken up by the exodus of the children. In twos and threes, in batches and droves, they were being dispatched to destinations, of which no-one knew in advance. The accommodation required was known and the necessary number of billets had been provided. But as the children went, some of them tearful but most of them apathetic or mildly excited, no-one could say to which billet a child would be sent. All that could be known was the Government's fear that London and many great towns would be no safe place, and refuges had been selected that might offer escape from the threat of aerial bombardment.

Nothing of the sort had ever taken place in Britain before and the bereaved parents, accepting the enforced parting

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from their children, did so with that fatalistic acquiescence that marks the urban dweller who has become inured to treatment as a cog in a vast machine, grinding away to but dimly conceived ends and for unknown beneficiaries. Even the few who actively took part in the mass evacuation found it little more palatable to pack the small boy and his sister into the train and consign or take them to the distant relation. It was a day in which all the comfortable foundations of normal life seemed to be uprooted and one could only cling to the supports of the daily round in this new and shifting world.

But if these events were disturbing, others were taking place in Poland which were heart-rending. Early in the morning a vast German army had crossed the frontier and as the day dragged on the country was being overrun. Infantry are comparatively slow-moving people. A healthy man or woman can in a day walk two or three times as far as the infantry of an army marches. But the army which crossed the frontiers of Poland moved on wheels or wings; and the peaceful farmer working fifty or a hundred miles from the German frontier felt the blows of the war almost as soon as his sons in the army. Tanks darted about the country with the apparent abandon of bees released from a bottle. Overhead were other swarms of noxious visitants. They did not always keep their distance; at times they would descend and a stream of machine-gun bullets would at least put a term to the wonder of the puzzled.

These things became known to the world only little by little. The world of to-day has devised means of adding confusion to the fog of war. The wireless spreads news quicker than the newspaper, and the Germans had long realized the possibilities of this unique method of swaying people. By means of lies and terror, terror and lies, much

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more may be achieved than would have seemed possible even a quarter of a century ago. In this first experience of war on the new model, the world was largely at the mercy of the wireless. The military operations were so formless by traditional standards, that no coherent picture could be formed of the progress of events. Names sprang into prominence that were far away from the frontiers, and fighting seemed to be taking place miles in the rear of the great armies. In such circumstances the Germans found golden opportunities in the wireless, and, in default of the customary dispatches from reputable correspondents, had things their own way.

In less than a week, however, it was learned that the Polish Government had left Warsaw. A day or two later Field-Marshal Goring was declaring that Poland's three great armies were overpowered and nothing remained of the campaign but the useless resistance of detachments. It seemed incredible; and it was in fact untrue. But what lingering hope Britain and France had of the Poles making a stand and giving time for the advance from the Maginot Line to reach a vital centre, what chance there was of compelling Germany to fight simultaneously on two fronts perished suddenly on the morning of Sunday, September the 17th, when the Russians crossed the Polish eastern frontier, in the rear of the struggling armies. Everyone realized immediately that all was over. The first *blitzkrieg* had succeeded almost beyond the hopes of the Germans.

The repercussion of these swift events in Britain and France was much too slow for the people. The evacuation had shown that the Government intended to go to war. A formal and public statement had been made some months before. On March the 31st the Prime Minister had informed the House of Commons that.

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‘In the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty’s Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power.’

This guarantee marked a new epoch in British foreign policy; but by the time that Germany crossed the Polish frontiers it was part of the national outlook. Public opinion therefore became restive when the first days of the invasion went by without any action. On Saturday, September the 2nd, the first time Parliament had met on that day for many years, this feeling was expressed very forcibly by the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. ‘How long’, he asked, ‘are we prepared to vacillate at a time when Britain and all that Britain stands for, and human civilization are in peril’; and he urged that we should ‘march with the French’ Sir Archibald Sinclair spoke in the same sense on behalf of the Opposition Liberals

The Government were, in fact, still trying to prevent the inevitable. They might have saved their energy, for Hitler had declared in the Reichstag on the day that the Germans invaded Poland: ‘I will continue this struggle, no matter against whom, until the safety of the Reich and its rights are secured.’ He had already stated that he would brook no interference. ‘When statesmen in the West declare that this affects their interests, I can only regret such a declaration. It cannot for a moment make me hesitate to fulfil my duty.’ Yet Mr. Chamberlain thought there might be possibilities worth exploring in the suggestion put forward by Signor Mussolini for a Five-Power Conference.

On the morning of Sunday, September the 3rd, however, the British and French Governments delivered ultimatums

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to Herr Hitler requiring him to cease military operations against Poland and leave that country, demanding an answer before 11 o'clock; and at 11.15 the Prime Minister broadcast to the nation a message stating that no answer had been received from Germany and that, consequently, we were at war: 'Up to the last it would have been possible to have arranged a peaceful and honourable settlement between Germany and Poland, but Hitler would not have it. . . . We have a clear conscience. We have done all that any country could do to establish peace. It is the evil things that we shall be fighting against—brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution and against them I am certain that the right will prevail.' M. Daladier, the French President of the Council, also broadcast to the French people declaring that 'By standing up against the most horrible of all tyrannies and by making good our word, we are fighting to defend our land, our homes and our liberty.'

His Majesty the King at 6 p.m. also delivered over the wireless a message that deserves to be put on record. 'In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my peoples, both at home and overseas, this message, spoken with the same depth of feeling for each one of you as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself.

'For the second time in the lives of most of us we are at war. Over and over again we have tried to find a peaceful way out of the differences between ourselves and those who are now our enemies. But it has been in vain. We have been forced into a conflict. For we are called, with our allies, to meet the challenge of a principle which, if it were to prevail, would be fatal to any civilized order in the world.

'It is the principle which permits a State in the selfish



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pursuit of power to disregard its treaties and its solemn pledges; which sanctions the use of force, or threat of force, against the sovereignty and independence of other States. Such a principle, stripped of all disguise, is surely the more primitive doctrine that might is right; and if this principle were established throughout the world, the freedom of our own country and of the whole British Commonwealth of Nations would be in danger. But far more than this—the peoples of the world would be kept in the bondage of fear, and all hopes of settled peace and of the security of justice and liberty among nations would be ended.

‘This is the ultimate issue that confronts us. For the sake of all that we ourselves hold dear, and of the world’s order and peace, it is unthinkable that we should refuse to meet the challenge.

‘It is to this high purpose that I now call my people at home and my peoples across the seas, who will make our cause their own. I ask them to stand calm, firm, and united in this time of trial. The task will be hard. There may be dark days ahead, and war can no longer be confined to the battlefield. But we can only do the right as we see the right, and reverently commit our cause to God. If one and all we keep resolutely faithful to it, ready for whatever service or sacrifice it may demand, then, with God’s help, we shall prevail. May He bless and keep us all.’

Such was the mood in which the Allies entered upon this fateful war. It was in the first days of the war of 1914 that a German uttered those astounding words praising ‘the fresh merriness of war’. On this occasion Germany had forgotten even how to be frank and covered her purposes in a veil of lies. In the very speech in which Hitler announced the invasion of Poland he declared that he wished to ‘establish a peaceful co-existence’ between Germany and Poland

## *The Outbreak of War*

and stated: 'Germany has no interests in the West, and our West Wall is for all time the frontier of the Reich on the West. Moreover, we have no aims of any kind there for the future. This attitude on the part of the Reich will not change.'

The Allies, being now at war, many movements were set in motion. The British Fleet was mobilized on August the 31st. The following day the British and French Governments proclaimed general mobilization. In the House of Commons war credits totalling £500,000,000 were passed. On September the 2nd, a Bill for Compulsory Military Service between the ages of eighteen and forty-one was passed, an event of which one can only measure the magnitude by recollecting the years which were required to reconcile Britain to it in the last war. Sir John Simon, now a member of the Government, had resigned rather than be associated with it on that occasion. Mr. Chamberlain at once set about reconstructing the Government. This was announced in the House at one of the very rare meetings held on a Sunday, when Mr. Greenwood again expressed the mind of the majority of his countrymen in a great fighting speech. His broadcast that night was full of courage and determination also. For a moment he was the one true voice of Britain so that the speech of Sir Archibald Sinclair, which followed, made no impression. But neither Mr. Greenwood nor Sir Archibald would agree that their parties should join the Government and they maintained this attitude while Mr. Chamberlain remained Premier.

## *The New Government*

As announced that evening the members of the War Cabinet were.

## *The New Government*

*Prime Minister:* Mr. Neville Chamberlain

*Foreign Secretary* Lord Halifax

*Chancellor of the Exchequer:* Sir John Simon

*Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence* Admiral Lord Chatfield.

*First Lord of the Admiralty:* Mr Winston Churchill.

*Secretary for War* Mr Leslie Hore-Belisha.

*Secretary for Air.* Sir Kingsley Wood.

*Lord Privy Seal* Sir Samuel Hoare.

*Minister without Portfolio.* Lord Hankey.

The Government included a number of new appointments; but by far the most important and most popular was Mr. Churchill's summons to his post at the outbreak of the war in 1914—the Admiralty. He became at once the most admired Minister in Britain and the most hated in Germany—a double satisfaction. Lord Halifax was to become the most widely trusted abroad of all. It was not his dignity or his authority that so firmly established him in the minds of foreigners as well as his own countrymen, so that whenever a change of Prime Minister was discussed he was among the favoured few—the first choice for foreigners—it was their conception of the firmness of his roots in high principle. Lord Hankey had been Secretary of the Cabinet from 1916 and knew more of the problems and procedure of a War Cabinet than any other member. Sir John Anderson, who became Home Secretary and Minister for Home Security, was that rare thing, an ex-civil servant who made a real success of parliament. If he did not suffer fools gladly, at least he did not ruffle their gladness.

The Government met with an oddly wide welcome. Even Mr. Gallagher, the solitary Communist, expressed his wish for the speedy defeat of the Nazi régime, as near an endorsement as he could contrive.

## *The Outbreak of War*

### *The Resources of the Allies*

The forces of the Allies were by no means negligible and now it seemed clear that they were about to be mobilized.

Many computations of the German strength have been made and few of them are worth the record. One of them, however, which has at least more reason to commend it is that which was given by the *Bulletin of International News* published by Chatham House. This estimate is founded upon the national income of Germany and the cost of the defence units. The computation takes no account of the possibility of concentrating the annual expenditure over a short period; but the result arrived at is this. Assuming the strength of the German Navy to be 100,000, Germany can mobilize an army of various strengths depending upon the strength of her Air Force: 3,750,000 Army and 150,000 Air Force, or 3,100,000 Army and 300,000 Air Force, or 2,480,000 Army and 450,000 Air Force.

These figures are not impressive; and they are probably an under-estimate. But they must be near the truth; and probably the first set of figures is the nearest to the truth. The army was not thought, however, to be so formidable as even these numbers would suggest. Germany did not introduce conscription until 1935 and the great numbers then probably mobilized could not have the proper quota of fully trained officers and non-commissioned officers. That was a weakness that time would cure; everything depended upon the time; and the Allies learned from their experience how much wishful thinking went to their estimates when Germany struck in the West. The British Army naturally suffered from the same defect. It was hoped that by the spring of 1940 a million men would be able to take their place in the field. But, clearly, that army would

## *The Resources of the Allies*

suffer from a shortage of trained officers and non-commissioned officers. This did not apply to the Regular Army; and, when within five weeks, there were sent to France 158,000 officers and men that army was for its size as good as any in the world and probably the best, though not best equipped of all. But besides the British Army and the Territorials and Militia, the Allies had the services of the French Army of about five million fully trained men. This had suffered no interruption in its training. Conscription had pursued its even way throughout the years when the Germans were restricted by the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. The Allies had, therefore, a considerable superiority in their army at least in theory. The Germans had been driven by the restrictions of the Treaty to adopt new expedients in their navy and it was soon apparent that they had similarly dealt with their army. In numbers, however, of thoroughly trained units they do not appear to have had the superiority that their national numbers would suggest.

About the comparative strengths of the naval forces there was less doubt. At the outbreak of the war the strength of the German Navy was about 35 per cent that of the British Navy, which was the strongest in the world. Taking the Allied navies together and setting them against that of Germany, they compared as under—

	<i>Britain and France</i>	<i>Germany</i>
Capital ships	21	7
Cruisers	110	6
Destroyers	185	17
Submarines	130	43
Aircraft-carriers	9	none

There was here an immense superiority on the part of the Allies, quite apart from the tradition which was an invisible

## *The Outbreak of War*

accretion of the British strength that was soon to make itself felt

All figures of the comparative strengths of the Air Forces are mere guesswork; but there can be little doubt that the Germans had built up a huge superiority. Even after months of accelerated construction the Allies had not half the numerical strength of the German Air Force. But, as speedily became apparent, the Royal Air Force had much superior machines and much better pilots; so that from very early in the war they had established a superiority which was generally recognized.

## *The Military Outlook*

There is another point that deserves to be noted. Since the Great War a perilous body of doctrine had been developed which before many months had passed was to bring the Allies near to defeat. The French Army of the period before the Great War had been trained on the theory of the offensive at all costs. In accordance with this theory it took the offensive in the direction of the Ardennes and suffered so heavy a defeat that the operations in Belgium were gravely prejudiced. The French Army under Nivelle took the offensive once again in May 1917 against the German positions on the Chemin des Dames and was so roughly handled that parts of the army mutinied and it required the patient nursing of General Pétain for many months and the costly diversion of the British before Ypres to make it a fighting instrument once more. These terrible experiments and not less the appalling offensives on the Somme and at Ypres were the dirge of the offensive.

Everything and everyone who after the war suggested

## *The Military Outlook*

the offensive came in for the roughest treatment, despite the fact that the war was won by a great offensive. As a reaction to the cult of the offensive, there grew up a new religion that the defensive had been developed to such a pitch that if any new war should break out it would at once become a stalemate. This doctrine did not depend upon the construction of the Maginot Line and the West Wall. Indeed, the former was thought to be based on principles which if not unsound were not beyond criticism. It represented a form of *rigid* defensive, deep indeed, but none the less rigid; whereas the mobile, elastic defensive with its provision for a light holding of the forward zone and for immediate counter-attack in case of penetration or organized counter-attack in case the attacking force was able to establish itself, was the more perfect. It was held to offer so formidable an obstacle that it could not be overcome.

This doctrine could be defended by much sound evidence; but, even if it had been indisputably true, no war could be won that way. In fact it may be that unconsciously the pacifist motive had induced some of its advocates to press it beyond the sanction of the evidence. Certainly in the post-war years the doctrine was so fashionable that anyone who challenged it was liable to be treated as a sadist, in love with the appalling suffering of modern war. Worse than this, like most heresies it begat an evil brood of offspring. The defensive was so strong that only with a *total* superiority of three to one could any army hope to overcome another. The advocates of this stupid corollary insisted that the Official History of the Great War actually stated this in so many words, and that, therefore, the Committee of Imperial Defence endorsed the theory. The application of this theory to the present war was that since neither Germany nor the Allies could muster a total force three times

## *The Outbreak of War*

as great as the other, the war was an unbreakable stalemate. I pointed out that neither did General Edmonds say what was attributed to him nor did his words bear the meaning attributed to them, and the General at once agreed that I was right. That statement ended the discussion until the Germans with a rude hand disposed of the illusion once for all.

But the false doctrine had already done almost irreparable harm. It had given military theory a fatal wrench towards the mechanical. It tended to place far too much emphasis upon mere numbers and even upon machines. The supremacy of the human factor, upon *morale*, which had inevitably been depreciated with the new belief in numbers, soon re-established itself in the ordeal of actual fighting. Indeed, if *morale* had not been dominant and mere numbers had, the Allies would have been swept from the field when the vital test came. Dunkirk was an irrefutable argument. Somehow the intellectual has a fatal if paradoxical tendency to find his scapegoat for defeat in something mechanical; but it was the human brain and mind that from the first dominated the situation.

It has been suggested that the German Army may have been numerically inferior to the Allied armies. Certainly it was not through numbers it overran Poland, occupied Norway, crushed Holland in a few days and in little over a fortnight brought the Allies to the verge of defeat. It was a securer reading of military history. The Germans rightly refused to accept the doctrine that the defensive is supreme. They rightly recognized that the tank is an offensive weapon. It had been invented by Britain in the Great War and it had given them the victory. The first war aeroplanes had been built by Britain. In February 1918 the Tank Brigade showed at Fricourt that the low-flying aeroplane could im-



## *The Military Outlook*

mensely assist the tank by giving it protection. All that the Germans had to do was what they invariably do—develop the new tactics to the *nth*. Even the tactics of infiltration had come from the Allies, who suggested, but never used them. General Fuller, fifteen years before the war, wrote a book in which the tactics which inspired the German attack in Poland and later in France were described in detail.

The numbers of the various armies and navies are, therefore, of secondary interest. Germany's triumphs on land depended on other factors, not only the skilful use of the machinery and tactics which had been cast up by the last war and made far more formidable by mechanical developments; but also by throwing overboard every sort of scruple, by treachery, brutality, lies. Her successes in the field were the result of more correct inferences, of harder heads and harder wills, just as the British naval successes were due to the same qualities. When the *Graf Spee* was beaten they showed themselves as clear-headed as did the Germans when they crushed Poland.

## CHAPTER 2

### *How It Came About*

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**T**o anyone outside England, dispassionate enough to observe things objectively, it must have seemed that war might have come to her any time from 1935 onwards; and, looking back now, it may seem that it would have been better that it had come then. What actually happened was that through some fatal urge she created the conditions under which the two most powerful European nations after France were thrown into each others arms and the third was not placated. Not only this, she alienated and insulted the one nation beside France that had any interest in the League of Nations, in which she trusted long after it had ceased to be more than a dangerous illusion, and obstinately refused to see anything wrong in the actions of Germany, which scared even Italy. So were the conditions produced under which an almost onnipotent Germany was created in Europe with a similarly dissatisfied Italy by her side and a cynical Russia ogling for her favours. Much has been said of the stupidity of the Kaiser in throwing overboard Bismarck's policy of an arrangement with Russia; but what can be said of the absurdity of British governments in jettisoning their historic policy of dividing in order to rule. Something might be said for a thoroughly bellicose Britain armed to the teeth defying the world. But, at the

## *How It Came About*

very time that she was uniting all the nations who hated or envied her, she was indulging in an orgy of peace ballots and grudging every penny spent upon armaments and every step that seemed to prepare for war

How this came about is in fact a more difficult problem than how Britain came to be at war in September 1939; but in the last analysis the two problems are one, and some attempt must be made to understand it. It has been said that 'the greatest of British interests is Peace'. On this proposition all the peoples who compose the British Commonwealth of Nations would agree. There was never, however, any similar unanimity about how that interest could be secured. In the critical period of the advent of Hitler to power Britain was still dominated by the conviction that *si vis pacem para bellum* was the precise opposite of the truth. It is not that everyone believed it, nor even that the most influential believed it; but the majority of the masses, following the old Liberal and Socialist tradition, gave their assent to it. The Labour Party in their dependence upon the trade unions acted upon the necessity of keeping their powder dry industrially, but, with sublime obstinacy, refused to believe that the 'capitalists' they knew were not infinitely worse than the foreigner whom they did not know.

But there are two parties to a war and the defencelessness of one does not logically make the aggressiveness of the other, though history shows that the defenceless rich almost invariably produce aggression in the strong poor. Germany, however, at the beginning of the period I have mentioned was not strong and her poverty was neither necessary or irremediable. The beginning of this process must be sought further back. For Germany, weak and poor, to become strong enough to challenge the world, she must

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first become aware of her poverty and the possibility of changing it, she must have strong and unscrupulous leading and she must have some foundation of real grievance for the leader to work upon. How she found the one and the other must be sought even further back in the history of Europe.

### *Germany and the Versailles Treaty*

Germany had been *beaten in the field in 1918*; and the blow to her pride rankled. The Treaty of Versailles would never have been signed if her statesmen had dared to refuse. Having trusted in their soldiers for four years they had now come to a point when they had no further confidence. So strange a malaise had seized upon Britain after the war that there were found some who even debated whether Germany had *willingly* signed the Treaty, as if it were a relevant question whether the power which had the ultimate responsibility for plunging Europe into war and had overrun the continent for four years did not like the judgement it had challenged. Does one usually take the gangster's judgement on the verdict as sound? If he is honest he will violently repudiate it and assert his innocence. It became almost an impropriety to suggest that Germany was anything but an innocent victim of the machinations of someone—Sassonov, Viviani, or even Sir Edward Grey.

The Treaty of Versailles was a harsh settlement; but it is completely untrue that it drew that character from its being drawn up by cruel cynics. It drew its harshness from the unconscious cruelty of the idealists; and which of them can have foreseen that when he launched the canon of self-determination he was preparing the explosive problem of the Sudeten Germans; and which of them, in drawing a

## *Germany and the Versailles Treaty*

defensive frontier for Czecho-Slovakia, thought he might be sowing the seeds of its passing when the Sudeten Germans had determined to unite themselves to the Third Reich? Or which of them, determined to release the subject races of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, imagined that he might be making inevitable the enlargement of a Germany which had been already powerful enough to defy the world for four years? Or which of them had imagined that in imposing an indemnity of any sort upon Germany he was preparing an excuse for the borrowing which would at least build up the German plant and at worst might be applied to her rearmament? The most terrible judgement on the Treaty was the statement of the most incorruptible idealist of them all, Mr. Wilson: *'I am not troubling about whether the terms are hard but whether they are just.'* No band of trained diplomatists would have dared think of justice, but they would have drawn up a more workable treaty in less time and with less friction.

But, though it would have been less insulting, it would not necessarily have been less harsh, from the German point of view. The Germans bitterly resented it; and they would have resented any treaty that in any way penalized them. There is one incident, not generally known, that seems to me to show this beyond a doubt. Solf, the German Minister, had agreed that a plebiscite in the then German province of Slesvig would be just. The Treaty of Versailles drew up several clauses to give effect to this expression of self-determination. The proportion of Germans in the territory was naturally greater in proportion to its nearness to Germany. In that part of Slesvig which adjoined Denmark it was only about one to three Danes and this formed a fairly well-marked stretch of territory. Then began a zone in which the great majority in some communes was Ger-

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man and in others Danes. These facts were known to all students of the subject and they were set down in one of those numerous studies which the British Foreign Office had produced in preparation for the time when such questions would come up for decision. In the Treaty it was decided that the first zone should vote *en bloc* and its nationality be determined by the majority. In the second zone, however, it was decided that the voting should be by *commune*. In this way it was sought to arrive at a settlement which should inflict no considerable hardship on anyone.

The actual voting followed expectation and accordingly the first zone was transferred to Denmark. The result had no sooner been declared than the German Government, the modest, republican, just Government of the immediate post-war period produced elaborate maps to show that in this Danish zone there were some few acres here and there which had a majority of Germans, although it was true that they were surrounded by Danes. Such an incident, occurring at such a time, appears to show that the Germans have never learned the art of losing with dignity, not to say composure.

It is an illusion to think that it was the language of the Treaty that was resented or that full acceptance would have been found for any less onerous terms, if the terms had in any way penalized Germany. It is an illusion to think that the Germans are a non-military nation in the sense that we are. They take to soldiering in the mass as they take to high technical training in a way that only the exceptional Briton does, and it is partly because they can take so high a technical training that they make such good soldiers. It is more due, however, to an apparent need for and delight in directions which characterizes the ordinary German; and it is in

## *Germany and the Versailles Treaty*

sharp contrast to the ordinary Briton, who almost invariably resents orders.

Even under governments which were apparently attempting to accommodate themselves to the conditions of the Versailles settlement it was clear that Germany was seething with resentment, only six years after the Treaty had been signed. In fact the spirit of revenge grew with every step towards recovery and as early as 1925 it had become a definite danger. It might be urged that Germany would never settle down to a condition in which she was overawed by the armies of France, Poland and Czechoslovakia; but it must not be ignored that these powers did not threaten Germany except in so far as they stood for the carrying out of the Versailles Treaty and particularly the attempt to rearm. This issue might be debated for ever; but in the light of what has actually happened the points which those who criticized France and her allies make appear to be specious rather than substantial. The very people who were loudest in their criticism were also most vocal in their criticism of Mr Chamberlain for the 'disaster of Munich'

But this is looking too far ahead. The seeds of the disaster which overtook Europe in 1939 were sown long before. As I have pointed out, the main cause was the fact that the Allies won the war and imposed a punitive Treaty upon Germany. It is now clear that she never attempted to carry out the provisions of the Treaty except in so far as they were imposed by force. Can one then blame France for keeping her force intact? When France was defeated in the war of 1870 she carried out the terms of the victor loyally, though they involved the cession of provinces which if largely German-speaking were French in sympathy. On the other hand, as early as the year 1922 the Reparation Com-

## *How It Came About*

mittee had to declare to Germany in voluntary default. It was known at the time that she was evading the military clauses also; but no-one in Britain appeared to think that of any account. On the reparation issue, however, France had secured judgement against her creditor; but after two days' discussion in the following January it was found impossible to secure agreement among the former allies for her proposals to deal with the situation, and on January the 8th the French invaded the Ruhr. According to the terms of the Treaty, in case of 'manquement volontaire' the Allies were empowered to 'take such other measures as the respective Governments may determine to be necessary in the circumstances'. Technically, the French and Belgium governments, in association with Italy, were merely sending a commission of engineers into the Ruhr to check the activities of the Coal Syndicate and prevent it evading the Treaty. But it was accompanied by troops. The Allies had no intention of occupying the Ruhr; but Britain stood aloof.

The German Government at once protested, reparation payments ceased, civil servants and railway officials were ordered not to obey the invader, and a system of passive resistance began. The prolonged struggle that ensued did not end until the French evacuated the Ruhr on the 23rd July 1925, having gained much less than they had sought, but having convinced their victim that some form of co-operation was better even for Germany. The German financial system had collapsed. On the 23rd of April 1923, two months after the invasion, the German bank rate was raised to 18 per cent, on September the 15th it was 90 per cent. But the French had other means beside military pressure at their disposal. They had begun to foster separatism in the Rhineland; and on October the 21st of the same year a Rhine Republic was proclaimed at Aix-la-Chapelle. A move



## *Hitler Appears*

ment was also initiated for an independent Bavaria. There were a number of leading Germans who favoured the separatist movement in the Rhineland in the conviction that they might use it as a bargaining counter against the claim for reparations; but with the establishment of an independent Bavaria there began to take shape the prospect of a powerful Catholic bloc from the Rhine to the Danube, under a Habsburg, actually if not formally under French protection. In 1939, when the war had broken out, these plans for clipping Germany's wings began to form the nucleus of the French plans for the post-war settlement.

## *Hitler Appears*

In 1923 the Bavarian separatist movement made great headway. The German Republican flag was no longer flown, the commander of the Bavarian Reichswehr had asserted his independence, and the secession was to be proclaimed on November the 9th, the anniversary of the foundation of the German Republic. At this point there stepped on to the stage a man who was later to dominate it. Mr. Wells, in one of the many erroneous prophecies with which he has delighted the world, said, in 1901, that the dominant demagogue had had his day and could no longer move the masses; and as usual he gave completely convincing reasons for his belief. 'It is improbable that ever again will any flushed undignified man with a vast voice, a muscular face in incessant operation, collar crumpled, hair disordered, and arms in wild activity, talking, talking, talking . . . rise to be the most powerful thing in any democratic state of the world. Continually the individual vocal demagogue dwindles, and the element of bands and buttons, the

## *How It Came About*

organization of the press and procession, the share of the machine grows.<sup>1</sup>

Though it did not appear at the time, the man who was destined to prove him wrong was now making his first essay in securing power, and his appeal was to be that of the inspired demagogue which modern developments have so amazingly increased. Before the advent of the radio only one person could hear a speech for every million who can do so now. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that personality can make its effect felt over the radio when it is powerless greatly to move an audience. There is no reason to think that Herr Hitler knew of any of these things, but he certainly realized, what democracy has apparently forgotten, that leadership is as effective now as it has ever been. Indeed it is truer to say that democracy can only be effective under supreme leadership; but it makes more calls for invincible courage than ever before.

Adolf Hitler was an architect by profession and an Austrian by birth. In the year 1919 he had formed the Nationalists Workers' Party, with a strong military organization as its foundation, known as the Hitler Volunteers. He had been a corporal in the Great War and from the first he leaned to military organization and distrusted democracy. It was this reason that drove him to found his Workers' Party in opposition to the Social Democrats. He set himself to stem the drift of Bavaria from Germany. He could depend upon his storm battalions; and, having won the sympathy of Ludendorff, he hoped for the support of the Reichswehr. When the Bavarian Prime Minister, Dr. von Kahr, began to read his statement in the Burgerbrau Keller at Munich on the night of November the 8th proclaiming

<sup>1</sup> I must thank Mr Bentley's charming *Those Days* for this quotation

## *Stresemann*

Bavarian independence Hitler entered the hall with Ludendorff; and the meeting came to an end.

The next day the storm battalions marched through the streets with Hitler and Ludendorff at their head. They intended no more than to make a demonstration in favour of unity; but they were fired upon by the soldiers. Hitler apparently flung himself down and broke his clavicle; but sixteen of his men were killed and he was arrested with a number of others and sent to the fortress of Landsberg. He was not brought to trial before the following February, when he was sentenced to detention in a fortress for five years, but was released in December. It was during his period in prison that he wrote the first volume of *Mein Kampf*. The second volume was not published until the French had withdrawn from the Ruhr. It is an amazing book and Hitler has always had the benefit of its bitterness against 'the implacable and mortal enemy of Germany', France, while softening its harshness by the statement that his public acts constitute a revision of the book.

## *Stresemann*

The Hitler *putsch* cannot be said to have attracted the attention it was later seen to deserve, and interest was soon concentrated upon the attempts of Stresemann to restore order economically and internationally. Chancellor at first, he was Foreign Minister in the two governments of Marx, in that of Luther and also of Muller. It was as Foreign Minister that he initiated the negotiations that led to the Locarno Pact, which involved a mutual guarantee between Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain and Italy. The international outlook at this moment appeared to be better

## *How It Came About*

than it had been at any time since the war. The Locarno Pact not only included the mutual guarantee, but also two arbitration agreements between Germany and Belgium and France severally, and between Germany and Poland and Czecho-Slovakia severally; two guarantees between France and Poland and Czecho-Slovakia severally.

Stresemann had voted in the Weimar National Assembly for the rejection of the Versailles Treaty on the ground that it was intolerable and impossible for Germany to fulfil; but, in his foreign policy he strove to restore Germany to a position of equality in Europe and, after the Locarno Pact had been signed, secured her entry into the League of Nations in September 1926. In two years he had achieved what he had set out to do; but he failed to bring the evacuation of the Rhineland any nearer, and in 1929 he died.

## *Rise of the National Socialists*

It was in the following year that Herr Hitler began to assume greater prominence in Germany. He had been carrying on his work steadily and his appeal was addressed impartially to all with grievances, but particularly to the great majority who resented the operation of the Versailles Treaty. The Dawes Plan had been succeeded by the Young Plan, and in 1930 there was the strongest opposition to it; in fact, as the Chancellor, Dr Brüning pointed out, every plan which was suggested proved equally unpalatable. In this he was undoubtedly right, though he did not point to the obvious conclusion. But in this year took place the general election which was to herald the beginning of the end. The National Socialists, Herr Hitler's party, secured one-third of the votes through the divisions among the

## *Rise of the National Socialists*

centre parties. It became, therefore, the second strongest party, with 107 seats; and after that he consistently gained increasing power. He repudiated all reparations obligations, protested against the 'oppression and forcible subjection of Germany' and completely rejected the Versailles Treaty.

In the year 1932 the National Socialists became the largest single party in the state. In the election for the presidency, although the revered Hindenburg was a candidate, there had to be a second ballot and the result showed 19,300,000 votes for Hindenburg, 13,400,000 for Hitler, while the Communist candidate secured 3,700,000. In the Reichstag election in July the National Socialists secured 37.3 of the votes, and, with 230 seats, were the largest single party. Hitler had made such amazing progress that it was certain he must soon come to power.

For those who are interested in social developments this year in Germany presents a remarkable study. The malcontent National Socialist Party was not the only one to increase in strength. At the second Reichstag election the Nazis secured 33.1 of the votes and 196 seats and the Communists 100 seats. The Nazi vote was 11,737,000; but the Communist vote was 5,980,000. This was the largest *free* vote ever secured by the Communists in any part of the world, and Hitler and his comrades realized that their one possible rival was the Communist Party.

As the leader of the strongest party Hitler was summoned by Hindenburg to form a government, and, by this, Hindenburg meant an ordinary parliamentary government, since Hitler had let it become known that he claimed the complete power in the Reich and in the provinces. The same rights, he said, as Mussolini exercised in Italy. Hindenburg rejected these demands and when in reply to the president's

## *How It Came About*

invitation he claimed to form a 'presidial cabinet', independent of parliament, his claim was politely but firmly rejected. The Centre leader, Kaas, however, failed to form a government and Hindenburg appointed General von Schleicher. This tragic figure attempted to reconcile the army and the socially progressive parties and thereby alienated the big industrialists and the landed gentry. They therefore decided to oust him. It was a strange position, since Hitler's programme was decidedly left-wing and yet Hugenburg and von Papen made common cause with Hitler to get rid of Schleicher with the object of forming a nationalist government.

## *Hitler Chancellor*

Schleicher resigned on the 28th of January 1933; and two days later Hitler became Chancellor. He at once showed his cunning by including in his Cabinet only three Nazis. He had not abandoned his claim to the completest power. For the moment he was content to hold his hand; but only for the moment. The Reichstag, which had only been elected three months before, was dissolved and the elections arranged for March the 5th. On February the 2nd occurred the Reichstag fire. The Nazi police at once circulated the statement that the fire had been arranged by the Communist Internationals as the signal for a Communist revolution, and the Nazis by this means contrived to secure 44 per cent of the total electorate. With the Nationalist Party the Nazis now accounted for 52 per cent of the electorate.

If we are to believe *Mein Kampf* Hitler's hatred of Communism and Marxism is deep-seated and connected with his hatred of the Jews. He holds that Socialism, Social

## *Hitler Chancellor*

Democracy and Communism are anti-national, are invariably associated with the Jews and are the source of all evil in the modern State. Yet there is much social indignation in the first volume of *Mein Kampf*; and when he became Chancellor, aiming at the complete control of the State, there was much misery in the Reich. All attempts to combat the evil of unemployment had proved unavailing. The lowest figures were those of October 1932 and these showed that there were then over five million unemployed people in Germany. At the end of the year there were six million. One side of the Nazi movement was, therefore, extreme socialist and urged an immediate attack on the capitalists. Ten years before, Hitler had written with angry scorn of those who disparaged everything, including the nation, asserting that it was the invention of the capitalists; and he attributed these tactics to the socialists.

The other element of his appeal was his repudiation of the subjection involved in the application of the Versailles Treaty. The battle for the recognition of Germany's equality of rights in the matter of disarmament was only won finally after the long-repeated efforts of Mr. Henderson. It had proved a much harder struggle than the fight for the remission of reparations; but it had always had the sound support of the majority of Britons. So easy it is to put up with the pinch in one's neighbour's shoe!

Hitler had patiently waited to secure complete power before making an attempt to deal with the international question; and, when with the assistance of the Nationalists, he controlled 52 per cent of the electorate he was at first content to proceed as the weaker partner. He retained the Ministry as before. The one change he made was to place Goebbels in charge of propaganda. This remarkable patience of Hitler should have attracted more attention. It

## *How It Came About*

is what has made him formidable, the power to wait until the train is exactly laid. And he was now content when he controlled almost half of Germany. Through propaganda he at once began his campaign against the German mind and the persecution of all opposition views, and by the year 1934 he was in control. Hindenburg died on August the 2nd and the Cabinet amalgamated the offices of the Chancellor and President. To give a colour of national approval to the change an election was arranged. There was no other candidate and no electioneering against him was allowed. It was, therefore, less remarkable that he secured 38,400,000 out of 45,500,000 than that seven millions did not vote for him.

There were no other parties, the Nazis had destroyed them; and being now firmly in the saddle Hitler at once set about the policy which had won him so many and so strangely assorted a body of adherents. For the Nazis not only included the left wing led by Strasser, which with the Radical leaders of the S.A. he had wiped out at the end of June, but also a right wing of which Goring, leader of the S.S., Himmler, and Schacht of the Reichsbank, were the principal figures; and in between were the S.A.

Secret evasion of the disarmament clause of the Treaty had been going on for years. The strength of the army permitted was 100,000; but it was almost three times as strong, and now the policy of increased armaments was more openly adopted. But Hitler had to protect Germany for the present and he did so with the most patient cunning. Poland was disarmed by an agreement for ten years. Germany had inaugurated the policy of treating solemn international agreements as scraps of paper; Hitler regarded them as thistledown, but no-one knew that at the moment. Oddly enough, his present axis partner was the most suspicious of him. In July Dr. Dollfuss, the Austrian Chancel-



## *Reintroduction of Conscription*

lor, was murdered; and, as Mussolini was convinced that Hitler was behind it, he no longer regarded Hitler as a friend. At this time Mussolini was determined that nothing would make him agree to the union of Germany and Austria. But Hitler need not have been disturbed. The Allies were soon to heal that breach.

## *Reintroduction of Conscription*

Hitler lay low for the moment and then, in March 1935, he threw his first bombshell into the European concert. He reintroduced conscription. Rearmament was from this time quite openly carried out. The strength of the new army was fixed at thirty-six divisions, and suddenly armaments of all sorts, forbidden by the Versailles Treaty, began to be seen in the open. A constantly increasing proportion of foreign credits began to be devoted to rearmament, and the imports of essential foods suffered. Here was a time, when, if it was to be stopped, a halt might have been called to Hitler's policy. But Britain had been indulging in a Peace Ballot and no fewer than 11,640,066 papers were returned. What an irony that while the new German dictator was forcing the pace in rearmament England should be so engrossed with a campaign for whipping up support for a peace policy. It was not yet realized that the League of Nations Union! which had organized the ballot, had become so biased politically as to be practically an expression of the opposition. It was only later that the secretary resigned on those grounds. If it had been openly on the side of Labour it would not have been so damaging, since through its show of being non-political it was able to capture a considerable proportion of Conservative votes, so that the party whips were afraid of it.

## *How It Came About*

### *Abyssinia*

This was to have its effect later in the year. The Italo-Abyssinian dispute blew up. Its exact nature is of no importance, since any nation with territory adjoining Abyssinia could always justly complain of having its territory invaded by refractory tribesmen. It is sheer misuse of terms to describe Abyssinia as a civilized country, but it was a member of the League of Nations, a member on the proposal of Italy and against the objection of Great Britain. It was as a member of the League that Abyssinia made so wide an appeal, and it was because Mussolini sought prestige as well as 'living room' that the appeal caused so great an outcry. At almost that very moment Great Britain had sent an expedition across the frontiers of North West India to punish some tribes who were a little too exuberant. But no notice was taken of that. The Italian movements, however, had been proceeding some time to the full knowledge of Britain and France, who, not making any protest, were taken to have no objection. It was only when all the pieces were in position that suddenly the explosion came at Geneva.

This incident deserves attention, since it has probably more responsibility than any other single action for the German challenge in 1939. From the Italian point of view the action taken later by the League, and principally at the prompting of Britain, was unjust in another way. Law to be just must be universal and not selective in its action, and yet Italy knew, and the world knew, that other cases of 'aggression' had passed with only perfunctory condemnation. The Japanese action in China for instance. What the League, what we appeared to be saying was 'here is a conveniently placed not-too-strong aggressor. Let us make an

## *Abyssinia*

example of him.' That was how it looked to Italy; and yet in response to a great outcry the League Assembly voted by 50 against 2 that collective measures be taken against Italy

Ample justification could, of course, be adduced for such action. The Italian action was technically wrong; but it had so strong a family likeness to many of the actions by which empires have been established that many people hoped that some way might be found out of the difficulty, and Sir Samuel Hoare and M. Laval, meeting in Paris at the beginning of December, produced a scheme which might have saved the situation. The British Government had already launched Sanctions by Order in Council, a month before, and the Opposition was adamant. Mr. Baldwin, seeing how the tide was setting, accepted Sir Samuel's resignation. When Sir Samuel rose later in the month to make a personal explanation his speech was so cogent that it is almost certain that the Government would have carried the day if the Premier had stood by his Foreign Secretary. How great was the need of courageous leadership that day. Much later, Dr Dalton in his book *Hitler's War: Before and After*, said:

'Signor Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia in September 1935 could, I believe, have been avoided by capable and honest Anglo-French diplomacy. The right type of solution, given all the circumstances, was the peaceful acceptance by Abyssinia of a régime akin to an Italian mandate, with special facilities for Italian immigration, an international loan for development. . . .'

If that solution had been boldly put forward by Labour at the time it would undoubtedly have offered the basis for a settlement with every prospect of acceptance. Dr. Dalton himself says that if such a scheme had 'been proposed early

## *How It Came About*

enough by France and Britain, both Italy and Abyssinia might then have accepted it'. He is sanguine about Abyssinia; but it is certainly probable that Italy would have accepted it and the Powers could have brought about its acceptance by Abyssinia. But anyone who heard the Opposition speeches after Sir Samuel Hoare had made his defence could be left in no doubt about their attitude to Italy. As to the Hoare-Laval proposals their detail matters little. Here is the judgement of one who is not a politician but a scholar:

'The Government with its knowledge of the diplomatic situation, well knew that the Hoare-Laval proposals were good and would justify themselves in time, whereas the agitation was the work of an ignorant and irresponsible public.'<sup>1</sup>

The step that was then taken could never be retrieved. Britain and France gave Italy the impression that they were completely inimical to all her aspirations. They had been pressed on, unconvinced and doubtful, by a body of agitators in England. But it was the governments who had to carry out the policy and the countries that suffered the consequences. For when the governments set about the application of sanctions they found that they were hardly likely to be effective in stopping Italy. Neither of the governments contemplated war; and no-one but a completely irresponsible handful wanted war; and yet without military measures the sanctions could have no effect except in the time it would require to reduce fifty Abyssinias. The sole effect it had was to impress upon Italy that she must neglect no means to force the campaign to a speedy conclusion; and hence the use of gas. But that was hardly what the agita-

<sup>1</sup> C. W. H. Sutton, Tutor, St. Peter's Hall, Oxford, *Farewell to Rousseau*, p. 191.

## *Germany Invades the Rhineland*

tors desired. The governments launched their campaign reluctantly, and thoughtlessly and in the event presented Mussolini with a ready-made triumph over the League.

## *Germany Invades the Rhineland*

But they did much more. They also presented Hitler with a ready-made ally. He was quick to profit by the new situation. Six months after the application, Germany denounced the Locarno Pact and sent troops into the Rhineland. Here was a direct challenge to the Powers. France had agreed to forgo the Rhineland on the promise of a guarantee by Great Britain and the United States. The latter never ratified the Treaty and Great Britain could not give the promise at the time. But the demilitarization of the Rhineland was some insurance against attack. At this juncture the question arose what was to be done. The German movement was a direct breach of the Versailles Treaty and it threatened France and her eastern allies. Poland accordingly urged the French to march against the Germans, promising to give her support. The French Government consulted the British Cabinet, who advised them not to take action. That perhaps was the last chance France had of checking Germany. Hitler had been advised by his generals that the risk should not be taken; but that cunning chess player had read the democracies aright. He knew that no democracy will go to war on any ground but sheer necessity; so he carefully removed a pawn. The democracies had long ago forgotten why the pawn was in that particular position and consequently ignored it. Hitler had won.

In Britain the position was discussed in a flutter of excitement and detachment. The current feeling was that

## *How It Came About*

after all the Rhineland was German territory and therefore the Germans should be free to place their troops in it if they wished. The position was differently regarded in France; particularly in military quarters. But the deciding factor was the traditional view of the peace-loving democracy that anything looking like aggression was uncongenial, and, since the British Government felt the same way, all that could be done was to register a protest.

But what a difference it made to Herr Hitler. His prestige was enormously increased; and he had gained in self-confidence. He had now verified his conclusions about the weakness of democracies. He felt he could take greater liberties with them. A little later in the year Germany denounced another part of the Versailles Treaty—the part dealing with the international control of German waterways, and protested against the Franco-Soviet alliance. Then Hitler began to improve his isolated position. Very cautiously he began to cultivate better relations with Italy. The campaign for the union of Austria to Germany was deliberately slowed down in order to make the approach easier. At the same time Germany made an anti-Communist pact with Japan.

But, a short time after this suggestive development, he had begun to assist the Spanish Nationalists in their attempt to overthrow the Government which had fostered anarchy in Spain. This episode cut sharp divisions in British opinion. The struggle had been running for nearly a year when a letter appeared in *The Times* (5th of May 1937) over, perhaps, the best-known initials in British Liberalism, J.A.S :

‘The fate of Oviedo is peculiarly significant since the first step in its destruction by the Left was taken as long ago as October 1934, when the Spanish Left, in the name of the class war and armed revolution, rose in rebellion

## *Germany Invades the Rhineland*

against a Radical and Moderate Conservative Government. There were no German or Italian aircraft in Spain in those days. It should never be forgotten that the parties responsible for the rebellion and outrages of 1934 are those now in control of the Valencia Government. It is their leaders whom the British public is taught to regard as the champions of liberty and democracy and who receive the gracious patronage of the Duchess of Atholl while engaged in the cold-blooded extermination of Liberals, Radicals and Moderate Conservatives, an extermination . . . which is surely, in the words of the Bishop of Winchester, as much a "cruel, deliberate, cold-blooded act against the laws of God and against every law of civilization and of man", as the bombardment of Guernica.'

But intransigent idealists of the Left would not admit that robustly sensible view, and they took refuge in the plea that Germany was not single-minded in her intervention in Spain. Who can doubt they were correct. Germany saw in Spain the chance of exercising her newly embodied air arm. She could try out her aeroplanes and her tanks in Spain; and, as Soviet Russia was helping the other side, give expression to the immediate direction of her policy. The Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936 and five months later Germany secured Japanese adhesion to the anti-Communist pact. Germany also hoped, no doubt, that she would secure a footing in the Iberian peninsula which might be immensely valuable when she came to deal with France.

But though the British Left Wing took every opportunity of proclaiming their support of the Spanish Government, they would have nothing to do with the Government's re-armament scheme. Their objection was to anything which might strengthen the Government's hand against Russia

## *How It Came About*

At this moment the solidarity between France and Britain was stronger and more intimate than it had been for many years and the head of the French Government was M. Blum, a socialist of a form extremer than any represented in Great Britain except among the Communists. Under the circumstances a war against Soviet Russia was as likely as an expedition against the moon. Yet Mr Herbert Morrison gravely wrote in *Forward* (28th of March 1936):

‘No Socialist worth his salt can be party to Hitler having a free hand for war on the Soviet.’

That was four months before Hitler intervened in Spain, and there was no trace of any plan against Soviet Russia. On the contrary, Russia was known to be more than a little intrigued with her fellow dictator in the West. At the end of the year the same statesman, discussing the Government’s defence programme, said that before sharing the responsibility for the programme the Labour Party wished to know against whom the arms would be used.

Even when Hitler was almost powerful enough to challenge the world he carefully dissembled his hate; and foreign relations would be impossible if, in producing the military estimates each year, a government were to state against whom the warlike preparations were being directed. If a government were to name the probable enemy of the moment, the Opposition would at once insist on the production of all the evidence and would challenge every item in it. Moreover, no nation which was really bent on attacking another would wait while the preparations were carried out. Yet that was Mr. Morrison’s statement. He insisted on being informed of the identity of the enemy, of which neighbour the programme was directed against:

‘Arms? Maybe But against whom—Germany or Russia? Fascism or Socialism?’ . . . The Government flatly re-



## *Guns or Butter*

fuses to tell us. Very well. We must, in such circumstances, flatly refuse to support their armaments policy.<sup>1</sup>

Nine months after the war began Dr. Dalton said that the Germans had been preparing the campaign for the last six years. But the Government which had some evidence that all was not well in Germany and wished to take precautions could only do so after a sort of obstacle race.

## *Guns or Butter*

Hitler looked on happily at the divisions and lack of purpose abroad. He was quite content. The road ahead showed no obstacle; but he meant to take no more risks than were necessary and he had already ordered full speed ahead with the armament programme. Goring's four-year programme was making headway but the food position was bad. Someone had said that there must be a choice between guns and butter; and though there was no hint of shortage during the Olympic Games, as soon as they were over the pressure grew. In 1937 even the quality of the bread was bad; but there was no abatement in the munition industry. If, in the year before, the German victory was being prepared, during this year it was being assured. There were again some unconvenanted gifts. Russia was indulging in an army purge which threatened to reduce it to impotence and her ally, France, was living through critical days, politically.

The omens appeared to be favourable and Germany profited by them. In October, Belgium asked Britain and France to release her from the obligations she had undertaken under the Treaty of Locarno and Germany seized the opportunity graciously to declare that she would respect

<sup>1</sup> *Forward*, 26th of December 1936.

## *How It Came About*

the inviolability of that country. The next month she was successful in persuading Mussolini to sign the Anti-Communist Pact. To-day that seems an extraordinary irony, and it is doubtful whether Italy meant much more by it than Hitler, though it was a matter of deadly seriousness to Nationalist Spain. It certainly sounded well and it did away with the isolation which Hitler hated so much. He had contrived to gather to his side the two great dissatisfied nations of the world and he had proved to his own satisfaction that the democracies would not interfere with his rearmament or with its use when ready.

It was the year 1938 that really wakened Britain and France. Hitler now began to press forward with the accomplishment of his policies. The domestic situation was far from promising. Germany was almost becoming accustomed to the scarcity of food and raw materials, but she could not continue in that state for ever and a beginning must be made in the application of the plans that lay so near his heart. There was a domestic upheaval of another character which he at once turned to profit. General Blomberg had made a marriage which, though it was approved by Hitler, was taken as a *mésalliance* by the army officers headed by Fritsch. Hitler disliked having his hand forced, so both Blomberg and Fritsch were displaced. He made himself Commander-in-Chief, with Keitel as Chief of Staff; and the upheaval gave him the opportunity to make another change. Herr von Ribbentrop, who had been a champagne traveller and later Hitler's representative in London, was made Foreign Minister.

## *The Anschluss*

### *Ribbentropism*

It was an ill wind that had sent this man to London. He had neither manners, modesty nor insight. The first found him rebuffs and the others persuaded him that he knew England when he knew no more than the unpleasant Nazi illusion about it which he had brought in his case of samples. He was so much a Nazi that he greeted the King with a Nazi salute and, though His Majesty meets all sorts and conditions of people, bad manners are rather a change for him.

But as Hitler's Foreign Minister he was a disaster, since he fostered all his master's illusions about the world that Hitler had never seen. It was not long before he showed his mettle. A week after he became Foreign Minister Schuschnigg, the Austrian Chancellor, received a peremptory summons to Berchtesgaden, where Hitler had installed himself, and he was at once presented with a series of demands. Among them was a complete change with regard to the Austrian Nazis and, as an earnest of the change, Seyss-Inquart, their leader, was to be made Minister of the Interior. The meaning of these demands was lost upon no one. Mussolini realized the situation; Schuschnigg saw it only too clearly. But after a browbeating from the Führer he agreed. A week later Hitler announced his success in the Reichstag and claimed the right of self-determination for the millions of Germans in Czecho-Slovakia and Austria.

## *The Anschluss*

Dr. Schuschnigg, in this crisis of his fate, made a terrible mistake; though if he had left matters to take their course

## *How It Came About*

the result would have been the same, but the time-table might have been different. Schuschnigg declared that a plebiscite should be held on the question of the freedom of Austria. Hitler took this as a challenge. On March the 11th the German troops were sent across the Austrian frontier and made their way to the Brenner Pass. What can have been Mussolini's thoughts when he found his bullying comrade on the threshold of Italy. But he had had the warning and, alienated from the democracies after his victory over 'fifty nations', he could do nothing

The first fruits of the experiment was the remilitarization of the Rhineland; the second was the Anschluss. The union of Austria to the German Reich was proclaimed on March 13.

The effect of the coup in Britain was much as might have been expected. When the remilitarization of the Rhineland had been taken so calmly, it was only expected that the Anschluss would cause no outcry. It involved considerations of justice that made it palatable to many; and there had always been a body of opinion in favour of it. The idealists who broke up the Austro-Hungarian empire apparently did not think of such mundane things as the economic foundation upon which Austria was to rest. Nor apparently did they imagine how the drift towards union with the Reich, so strongly reinforced by the economic isolation and lack of viability of Austria, was to be prevented for ever. The possibilities of such a union cannot have failed to occur to them. But now that it had taken place there appeared to be nothing to be done about it and Hitler had carried out, in spite of the doubters in his own country, another step towards the attainment of his ambition. The Greater German Reich could now look forward confidently to greater tasks.

## *Hitler's Designs on Czecho-Slovakia*

British reactions could have been predicted; Italy's after the Sanctions experiment were not gravely in doubt. But it must have taken some specious diplomacy to make palatable what Mussolini had found so objectionable only a few years ago. Behind the scenes there was much active wire-pulling, and, hardly six months later, Hitler visited Mussolini in Rome. It was apparently a popular visit, but those who regarded it a little more closely saw how forced was the 'popular' greeting. But the role of the visit was to win over Mussolini, and in that it was apparently successful Hitler knew that as he had forced his ally to swallow this bitter pill, there was nothing he could not force upon him.

## *Hitler's Designs on Czecho-Slovakia*

At once the Sudeten German party redoubled their agitation. Czecho-Slovakia was one of the creations of the Western idealists. It had been given a beautifully strategic frontier and it seemed hardly worth thinking of the German quarter of the population. At the time Germany was beaten to the dust; and although, as has been seen in the matter of the Slesvig plebiscite, they do not take kindly to the alienation of their nationals and particularly when it is done in the name of self-determination, a new abracadabra, 'minority clause', was supposed to meet all such indelicate suggestions. But in 1938 the Sudeten German question was explosive; and in the end it blew the European peace sky-high. For Hitler, like the very different visionaries of Versailles, also believed in maps and frontiers. He had seen that Austria was not only the home of the Germans of his birth, it was also the protective flank of Czecho-Slovakia. When he had incorporated Austria in the German Reich,

## *How It Came About*

he had by the same stroke placed Germany on the southern flank of Czecho-Slovakia. She was already on its northern flank. Indeed the Czech country was now almost an isthmus in German territory. The country had still a fortified and defensible frontier, but it was open to attack on a flank that had never been foreseen.

In September, the situation became rapidly critical. On the 12th of the month Hitler declared that the oppression of the Sudeten Germans must be brought to an end; and, the rough outline of Hitler's technique being already known, the spectre of war reared its head once more. It was when the situation could no longer be denied that Mr. Chamberlain took a momentous decision. He had only been Premier some sixteen months and he was already an old man. He came to the decision that what diplomacy had failed to effect might be achieved by personal intervention. He flew to Berchtesgaden and had an interview with Hitler. He was received graciously and a friendly discussion took place. It was not carried to a successful issue since the Premier wished after his first exploration of the question to report to his Cabinet; but on the 22nd he once more flew to Germany for a second conference. This time Hitler, with the sort of gracious gesture in which, costing him nothing, he was so prolific, had agreed that the meeting might take place at Godesberg, which slightly shortened Mr. Chamberlain's journey. This meeting brought matters to a head. Hitler now invited Mr. Chamberlain, M. Daladier, the French Premier, and Signor Mussolini, to a conference at Munich to settle the Czecho-Slovak question finally.

## *Munich*

## *Munich*

At Munich agreement was reached. The German claims were substantially accepted but instead of the Germans achieving their end by a military expedition which could hardly have failed to result in Czech resistance and war, the occupation was to be carried out in an orderly way, according to an agreed time-table. The British and French had in any case to bring pressure on the Czechs to accept the agreement. Mr. Chamberlain had already sent Mr. Runciman to make inquiries on the spot; but he failed to see any better way out of the difficulty. Mr. Chamberlain therefore returned from Munich with peace reserved. War had seemed to be merely a matter of hours in the preceding week. The heads of the British and French armies had been in consultation; and, on the day of the Munich Conference, orders had been issued for the mobilization of the British fleet. But, with the agreement, the crisis appeared to be at an end. Hitler even signed a declaration with Mr. Chamberlain that the method of consultation should be adopted to deal with any future disagreements between their two countries as it had been in the Anglo-German naval agreement, and that the signatories should continue their efforts to remove possible sources of difference and thus assist in assuring the peace of Europe.

Mr. Chamberlain received a magnificent ovation on his return to London on October the 1st, but Mr. Duff Cooper resigned and in the debate on the agreement Mr. Churchill delivered a strong attack. Yet the difficulty under which Mr. Chamberlain laboured was not only that the nation was not prepared for war but that *the French had no intention of going to war and no readiness*. Moreover, many people, probably the great majority, did not see in the

## *How It Came About*

immediate issue any cause for war. It is true that the Left had been agitating against Hitler in the most violent way; but their objection was that he was not of their way of thinking, he was a Fascist, an anti-Bolshevist. The vast majority of British people saw no more reason to attack him for his Fascism than to attack Stalin for his Bolshevism. That cause ruled out, the solution adopted by the Munich Conference was just, if self-determination meant anything at all. So far it will be observed that Hitler had been able to plead some colour of justice for every move he had made; and it is certain that no united Britain could be found for war under such circumstances. The persecution of the Jews and the inhuman terrorization in restraint of all liberty were no argument against Hitler any more than the terror in Russia was against Stalin.

But Mr Chamberlain knew as well as anyone that Hitler was becoming a focus of disturbance in Europe and that he would have support for increasing British armaments. He was taunted with his policy of 'appeasement' not only in this country but also in America; and the word most applied to the Munich settlement was 'betrayal'. As the facts stood at that moment the word was inappropriate; but he was attacked in unmeasured terms. It is easy to be wise after the event; but only by a gross misuse of words could it be said that Hitler deceived 'only those who wished to be deceived'. It was for the next year to make the position plain not only to those who hated Hitler's internal policy but to the mass of the people who saw that, if we are to go to war whenever we disagree with the internal policy of another State, we should never have peace.

But Hitler had now taken another step on his ambitious journey. By the Munich settlement he had made Czecho-Slovakia practically defenceless. The Sudeten German dis-



## *Occupation of Czecho-Slovakia*

tricts bit into the country deep inside the protected frontiers, and Hitler saw to it that the Czechs were not given time to take any steps to re-erect a barrier against aggression. The German armament industries had been working on a sixty-hour week while the French were fighting for forty. Now the whole German nation was geared to the armament tempo Hitler was taking no undue risks. He had seen that attempts were being made in Britain to re-arm; but he had started long before and he could count on immensely harder work by a nation nearly double the strength. The days of preparation were accomplished.

## *Occupation of Czecho-Slovakia*

Taking advantage of the appeal of the ex-Premier of Slovakia, Dr. Tiso, Hitler peremptorily summoned the President of Czecho-Slovakia and his Foreign Minister to Berlin, where, after lecturing them upon their failure to maintain order, he issued a series of demands. German troops moved into Moravia 'to restore order'; and, after a tragic attempt to avert the inevitable the President accepted. On March the 15th it was officially announced in Berlin that the President had 'trustfully left the fate of the Czecho-Slovak people in the hands of the Fuhrer and of the German Reich'. The independence of Czecho-Slovakia was at an end, and Hitler had at length thrown off the mask. This was the first step that Hitler had taken that was devoid of any colour of justice. The pretence of an appeal to restore order deceived no-one; and Hitler could deceive no-one any more.

But notice what he had achieved already. He had resumed control over the Rhineland and he had built a series of forti-

## *How It Came About*

fications which would, he thought, and through the current French obsession with the defensive actually did, protect his southern flank against invasion. He had then seized Austria, thereby uncovering the southern flank of Czecho-Slovakia. Then he had by agreement taken possession of so much territory inside the Czech fortifications that the country was almost defenceless, whereupon he had seized the first pretext to occupy it, thereby uncovering the southern flank of Poland.

## *Poland's Turn*

It was now Poland's turn. On the 30th of January 1939 Hitler had delivered a speech in the Reichstag in which, referring to the fifth anniversary of the German non-aggression pact with Poland, he said.

'There can scarcely be any difference of opinion to-day among the true friends of peace with regard to the value of this agreement. During the troubled months of the past year the friendship between Germany and Poland was one of the reassuring factors in the political life of Europe.'

Now he had laid bare the southern flank of Poland and that country saw every reason for alarm. A few days after seizing Czecho-Slovakia he took Memel, proposed that Danzig should become part of the Reich and that Germany should have a corridor of land across the Polish Corridor. There had been a growing agitation in Danzig, and it was obvious that something was afoot. When Hitler made his claims the Poles made counter-suggestions to ease the German conditions with regard to the corridor. The counter-proposals were unpalatable and Hitler later on accused the Poles of not replying to his proposal. This, of

## *Russian Intrigues*

course, deceived no-one, since it is the oldest of political tactics to insist that no answer has been made to an appeal unless it is the desired answer. But the Nazi press was now filled with stories of Polish oppression of the German minority; just as it had filled its pages with atrocities against the Sudeten Germans before the Munich Conference.

The seriousness of the situation was so obvious that Britain gave Poland on March the 31st a guarantee:

‘In the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty’s Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support.’

It was recognized everywhere that this was so astounding an innovation in British procedure that it constituted a new epoch, but it is in the highest degree improbable that it would have been possible if Mr. Chamberlain had not carried his policy of appeasement to the last grant at Munich. But it had no effect on Germany. Ribbentrop was at Hitler’s side to tell him that Britain would not fight, and if she did she was so decadent that she could do nothing. Hitler had already attempted to do away with the bad effect of the occupation of Czecho-Slovakia by his statement: ‘The contention that this solution is contrary to the Munich Agreement can neither be supported nor confirmed. This agreement could, under no circumstances, be regarded as final.’ Mr. Chamberlain’s guarantee was a pointed answer to that.

## *Russian Intrigues*

Hitler had denounced the Anglo-German Naval Agreement and then the German-Polish Pact, the anniversary of

## *How It Came About*

which he had so lately celebrated Britain and France now began to take the position with the utmost seriousness. Stalin, even before the Czecho-Slovakian coup, had stated that the Soviet Union stood 'for support of Nations which were the victims of aggressors and were fighting for their independence'; and Britain and France now approached him and attempted to secure from him the assurance that he would promise armed assistance to Poland if she would be attacked. But, after encouraging Britain and France and persuading them to send a military mission, Stalin suddenly replaced Litvinoff by Molotov and the negotiations hung fire. The British Left once more gave the foreigner the benefit of the doubt and blamed their own 'Conservative' Government. But the reason that Britain and France were unable to persuade Molotov to agree was that they were attempting to safeguard the independence of the Baltic States upon which Russia had designs, and the reason that the British Government could not state this was the desire to bring negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion. Labour would not have approved the sacrifice of the Baltic States, and yet, even when the chance of securing Russian aid was gone, the British Government could not justify itself because France was prepared to go further than Britain and this could not be said.

It is interesting now to remember that while these negotiations were going on there were outcries in the German press about 'encirclement', and, in ignorance of the German designs, Britain and those who sympathized with her attempted to answer Hitler. 'Germany is isolating herself', said Lord Halifax. The speech in which the Foreign Secretary used these words was notable for another striking statement. He hinted that Britain was not interested in stereotyping the present system but was firm about the

### *Russo-German Pact*

methods by which change should be brought about. But while these gestures were being made in public Germany was quietly attempting to effect an alliance with Russia behind the scenes. The German press, in the beginning of August, was full of indignation about an incident in Danzig which had been created by the Germans, who were quietly filling it with troops and passing troops into East Prussia. When this outcry was at its height the world was suddenly startled to hear that a Russo-German pact had been signed on August the 21st. Germany had proved much more complacent than Britain or France about bartering away another nation's liberty.

### *Russo-German Pact*

Germany had been most vocal about the iniquities of the Soviet rule. It was by means of the Anti-Communist Pact that Hitler had effected an arrangement first with Japan and then with Italy. It was in the name of an attack upon Communism that Germany had assisted Spain; and reading the pages of *Mein Kampf* it seems clear that he hated it. He had spoken of 'the sub-human forces of Bolshevism' only four months before; and in his earlier speeches he had exhausted a vocabulary, particularly rich in vituperative terms, in abuse of Soviet Russia. In fact that was one of the main reasons why British Labour knew they were right in hating him, since, though they were determined to keep Communism at arm's length in their own territory, they turned with instinctive violence against anyone else who criticized it. Hitler, however, had shown that his principles were not the same as his interest. His ruling interest was the conquest of Europe as a preliminary to the conquest of

## CHAPTER 3

### *The Polish Campaign*

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**I**t is time to see how the great nation of Poland was so quickly overrun. The Polish population amounted to two-thirds of that of Britain. Its army was immensely greater, since Poland is a conscript nation. Moreover, twenty years before, the army had received its baptism of blood when it turned back the Russian armies from Warsaw. It was supposed to be a first-class modern army, yet it was defeated in only sixteen days. Looking at events from the outside, it appeared to have no strategy, to have little tactical efficiency, and to show only stubborn, heroic fighting quality.

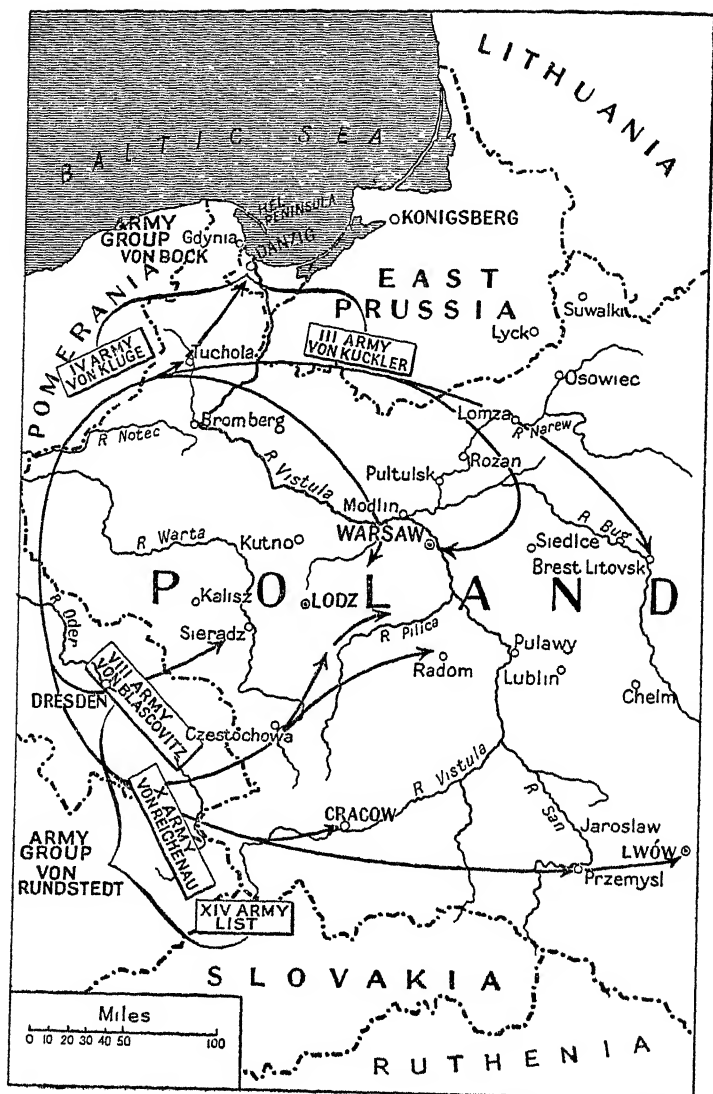
These judgements prove on examination to require serious modification. Poland was forced to fight under many grave handicaps, some of them inherent in her geographical position and some due to the German technique of attacking without warning. This was not the first German breach of international law and civilized custom, as we have seen, but for Poland it was so grave as to be almost in itself decisive. Foch said 'Preparation in modern war is more necessary and must be pushed farther than in the past . . . Unless one acts thus, one is forestalled and outdistanced by the adversary. One thing alone is of import: the point of preparation reached at the actual outbreak of war. . . . The

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results of mere moments in this matter reach very far.' 'A three-days advance in the French mobilization', wrote von der Goltz, before the Great War, 'would enable the French to surround Metz and Thionville, to cut the communications of Strasburg, and to reach the Sarre before the Germans could resist. The latter would then be compelled to withdraw their point of concentration back to the very ground where it took place in 1870.'

But von der Goltz did not foresee the tremendously increased tempo which mechanization was to bring to military operations. By striking, fully mobilized, at an opponent who was only beginning his mobilization, the Germans made it practically impossible for Poland ever to place in the field much more than half the number of divisions Hitler had actually ready for the invasion. But from her very position in Europe, Poland was already gravely handicapped. A glance at the map will show that, like Czecho-Slovakia, after the occupation of Austria, the bulk of her territory—all the important centres of population and industry—formed a peninsula in Germany. This encirclement of Poland, territorially, was only of recent development. Six months before the outbreak of war, through the occupation of Czecho-Slovakia, Germany had uncovered the Polish left flank; and with this the German strategy was predetermined.

With East Prussia on her northern flank and Slovakia on the southern, Poland could do little to improve her position. She had not mobilized, in deference to the Allies who urged her to negotiate as long as possible, fearing that mobilization would precipitate the dangers she and they most hoped to avoid. But it is difficult to see how even complete mobilization could have done more than put off the inevitable defeat. Her frontiers were some 1,300 miles in length. A defensive line of that length was impossible.



1 Poland German concentration and strategy



## *The Polish Campaign*

When the invasion began on the morning of September the 1st, the Germans had fully mobilized against her some 70 divisions, including 14 mechanized divisions. This force was arranged in two great armies under the supreme command of General von Brauchitsch. These two groups were disposed as follows:

Northern Army, General von Bock (Headquarters, Königsberg).

- (1) General von Küchler, East Prussia: 7 infantry divisions, 1 armoured division and 1 motorized division.
- (2) General von Kluge, Pomerania: 5 infantry divisions, 1 light division, and 1 motorized division.

Southern Army, General von Rundstedt (Headquarters, Breslau).

- (3) General von Blascowitz, Silesia, 8 infantry divisions.
- (4) General von Reichenau, Upper Silesia and North-eastern Moravia: 4 infantry divisions and 2 motorized divisions.
- (5) General List, Slovakia 6 infantry divisions, 2 armoured divisions and 1 light division

General Guderian, the theorist of the Panzer divisions and former Inspector-General of the Reich armoured forces, commanded 3 armoured divisions and 2 light divisions, which operated with the armies of General von Bock, and General Hoth commanded two armoured divisions operating on Reichenau's right flank.

These armies account for 46 divisions. There were 4 other infantry divisions standing opposite the tip of the salient of the province of Poznan, 6 others apparently in the army reserve of Bock and Rundstedt and 14 in general reserve.

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The Polish dispositions were:

- (1) General Bortnowski, Pomerania: 6 infantry divisions and 1 cavalry brigade.
- (2) General Kutrzebe, Poznan: 3 infantry divisions and 1 cavalry brigade.
- (3) General Rommel, Sieradz area: 3 infantry divisions and 1 cavalry brigade.
- (4) General Szylling, Silesia: 5 infantry divisions and 1 cavalry brigade.

In support there were three detachments in position:

- (5) General Fabrycy, Carpathian front: 2 infantry divisions.
- (6) General Przedzymirski, defending Warsaw: 2 infantry divisions and 2 brigades of cavalry
- (7) General Mlot-Fijalkowski, East Prussian front: 1 infantry division and 2 cavalry brigades.

And two in process of formation, to cover the line of the Vistula as far west and south as Tarnow:

- (8) General Dab-Biernacki, from Lodz to Kielce: 4 infantry divisions and 1 cavalry brigade, and
- (9) General Piskor, from Kielce to Tarnow: 4 infantry divisions and 1 motorized brigade

The total force in the front line was therefore 22 infantry divisions and 8 cavalry brigades with 8 infantry divisions, 1 cavalry brigade and 1 motorized brigade in support. There were 10 infantry divisions and 1 cavalry brigade in reserve, though four of these were not mobilized at the outbreak of war. Facing the 48 German divisions, therefore, the Poles had only 30 infantry divisions, 9 cavalry brigades and 1 motorized brigade; or taking the total force, 70 German divisions, including 6 armoured, 4 motorized and 4 light divisions were opposed to 40 infantry divisions, 10 cavalry brigades and 1 motorized brigade of Poles

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The numerical difference between the two forces was not, however, so great as the difference in the type of army. The Poles with their heavy concentration of cavalry and their lack of armoured units appeared to have prepared for a war of another period. Moreover, the Polish strategy appeared to offend against one of the most important principles of war, the economy of force. But all such considerations seem of little moment in view of the German strategy. General Brauchitsch had determined to break up the army as an organized force from the beginning of the campaign; and, accordingly, he had concentrated between two and three thousand aeroplanes in two groups north and south of Warsaw. One group, under General Kesselring, had its headquarters at Königsberg, and the other, under General Löhr, was based at Vienna.

At dawn this mighty force was set in motion; and, at once all the main nodal points of the Polish communications fell under a rain of bombs. No fewer than 36 towns were mentioned officially as having been bombarded and the attacks were delivered as far east as Brest-Litovsk and Lwów. Villages, farms and even farm carts were subjected to a rain of bombs and machine-gun fire from aeroplanes. The Polish Air Force could muster only a few hundred aeroplanes, and only a small proportion of these were able to give battle, as the aerodromes were at once bombed. The effect of this skilful and determined air attack was to produce an immediate break in that chain of information and direction that is necessary if armies are to fight as armies and not merely as independent units. Roads became blocked, railways cut; and confusion spread over the rear of the armies confronting the enemy.

At the same time the infantry and motorized units attacked with the utmost violence. General von Bock's two

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armies opened a converging movement from opposite sides of the Polish Corridor. It would have been wiser to have abandoned the Corridor at once, since it was indefensible against such an attack made in such force. But the Poles fought with the utmost bravery and obstinacy and it was not until September the 5th that the Corridor was cut off and the Germans were able to join forces at Chelmo, north-east of Bromberg. It was largely owing to the swift attack of Guderian's armoured divisions that the resistance in the Corridor was broken. In spite of their precarious position the Poles fought skilfully and courageously; but the armoured divisions moved rapidly eastward to the north of Bromberg, broke through at Tuchola and reached the crossings of the Vistula. The Polish communications were cut, three divisions were isolated, and after a heroic resistance, were compelled to surrender.

Meanwhile Blascowitz struck up across the frontier towards the Warthe and on the day that saw the junction of Bock's divisions below the Corridor, he had reached the river at Sieradz. On his right Reichenau advanced in the direction of Kielce, with Hoth's armoured divisions covering his right flank towards Czestochowa. South of the city he cut off a divisional staff in his rapid advance, which spread confusion up to the Vistula. List's divisions at the same time were penetrating the barriers of the Carpathians. The Jablunka was forced with little difficulty and also the pass below Zakopane. The tentative Polish move towards Orlo in Slovakia failed to check the advance on Tarnow.

On the 6th the position seemed already so threatening that the Government left Warsaw. The Germans were advancing in all directions and the armoured columns moved with such speed that the campaign seemed to be ruined almost before it had begun. One of Guderian's armoured

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units from the north had penetrated to the river Narew. This was as unexpected as it was unwelcome, for the Narew, with the Vistula and the San, offered the one strong natural defensive line. With the Germans at Roznan on the Narew, the northern part of this line was already threatened. One of Bock's columns had also reached Ciechanow, marching down the road from Mlawa. Blascowitz was moving upon Lodz. Hoth's armoured divisions were dashing ahead towards Piotrkow and Tomaszow. Reichenau had taken Kielce. Cracow had been entered, and List was moving up the Dunajec on Tarnow. At this point it is obvious that the bulk of the Polish armies were in peril. They lay far to the west of the lines of advance of General List and General Kuchler. The Germans threatened their line of retreat on Warsaw. They had deliberately encouraged General Kutrzeba to remain far to the west by not attacking; and, in fact, the only signs of movement had been the Polish attacks across the German frontier. Bortnowski fell back down the left bank of the Vistula and Kutrzeba had to retreat eastward, throwing out a strong flank guard against the advance of Blascowitz. Already a great accumulation of Polish troops was being constricted in a narrowing loop of Germans.

On September the 7th, only a week after the beginning of the invasion, the armoured detachment from Roznan had advanced to Pultusk, crossed the Narew and was approaching the river Bug, the alternative line of defence from the north. This column threatened to cut the communications of Warsaw on the east. Far to the south, List had crossed the Dunajec river and was pressing eastward towards Przemyśl. In between, despite the stubborn resistance of Rommel, Blascowitz was near Lodz. While Kuchler and List threatened the encirclement of all the Polish forces in

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the field, Blascowitz and Kluge were attempting to surround the main armies west of Warsaw. The defence seemed to be broken beyond repair. Indeed, two days later, Marshal Goring pronounced the epitaph of the Polish resistance 'The German Army has achieved things on the land and in the air which were previously unimaginable. The German infantry has marched as no infantry ever had before. I have this moment received the message that Poland, with its three great armies, is overpowered and hundreds of thousands of Polish soldiers are throwing away their weapons and the army is beginning to surrender'

It was not quite so bad as that; but the position seemed bad, bad almost beyond belief. It is to be noted that Goring did not claim that there had yet been any large-scale capture of prisoners. The army was only 'beginning to surrender'. No single one of the many stubborn rearguard battles had been a complete defeat. The clear symptoms—the lines of beaten men struggling back to the capital—had been entirely absent. Warsaw had been the object of ceaseless air attacks and the aeroplanes continued to spread over the country. On the day after Goring spoke, Lodz fell and the Germans arranged a triumphant march past in the city; only to be compelled to evacuate it two days later when it was recaptured by a counter-attack. But on the day that the Germans entered it the divisions on the Posen-German frontier began to advance eastward to assist in closing the western sector of the surrounding lines and fierce fighting took place at Kutno and at Modlin (known in the Great War as Novo Georgievsk), the fortress protecting Warsaw.

Already an attack had been made on the capital, an armoured division had been sent through by General Rein-

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hardt and, dashing between the armies of Rommel and Dab-Biernacki, it passed through Mszczonow on the 8th and entered Warsaw on the following day. The garrison of the capital were not, however, to be rushed and, after some street fighting, the armoured column, though General Reinhardt had informed Hitler of the capture of Warsaw, had to fall back. This was an instructive incident; and it was not the only case in which the Poles dealt roughly with armoured divisions.

On September the 12th the position appeared to be beyond hope. A great body of Polish troops was almost completely surrounded about Kutno and a smaller force was in a similar plight near Radom. Kluge and Blascowitz with the assistance of Guderian's armoured divisions were attempting to break the resistance of Bortnowski and Kutrzeba about Kutno. Under such conditions the Poles gave an excellent account of themselves, and after inflicting heavy losses on the Germans, Kutrzeba managed to extricate his troops and fall back on Warsaw, where Rommel had preceded him. Bortnowski was left to fight on, and his men maintained themselves, heroically, between Plock and Kutno. About Modlin, the Poles still contrived to hold off the main German forces from the river Bug; but farther east Kuchler had crossed the river; and the frontier fortress of Lomza, which had restricted the advance, fell into his hands. Kuchler's objective was the capture of Warsaw from the east. Due east of the capital, in the neighbourhood of Minsk, however one of his armoured divisions was fiercely engaged and destroyed.

But, in the far south, List's columns were making great headway. His armoured divisions had been daring almost to foolhardiness. One of them at this moment had taken Krakowice, which lies some miles to the north-east of

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Przemysl, and the other was at Sambor to the south-east. The fortress of Przemysl, which had gone through so many vicissitudes in the Great War, was left to more serious assault. That indeed was the German technique, to press ahead wherever they found a weak point and to summon assistance from the air or leave for assault in great weight any centre that was too formidable to yield to a *coup de main*.

This day, however, marked a check in the German advance. The rain fell for the first time and, though it did not persist it gave the defence heart. How often must the Poles have wished that their ancient ally had been more faithful. If there had been heavy rains, it is almost impossible that the German armoured and motorized divisions could have made such progress. They would have been confined to the roads and not been able to cut across the flat, sun-baked fields, and the roads were not all of the first quality and not all free for such traffic. As it was, on some occasions, staff cars were sunk to their wings and even horse traffic could make only slow headway. In many of the main roads concrete obstacles had been sunk, and the armoured cars were held up until they were removed. Even when that was accomplished, the cavities from which they had been taken had to be filled in before the surface was suitable for heavy traffic.

Marshal Smigly-Rydz had now discovered the sort of attack which he had to meet, and he drew up a new plan. He proposed to take the Vistula and the San as the nucleus of his defensive line, and then to swing his right back from Warsaw and the lower Bug across to the Pinsk Marshes. As, however, List's armoured columns were already across the San and advancing towards Lwow, he called in General Sosnkowski, whose experience should have won him high command at the beginning, to take charge of the southern



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front with the remains of Szylling's, Piskor's and Fabrycy's divisions. The result of the stiffened resistance was seen at once. The attack on the southern sector was checked. An attempted crossing of the Vistula at Annopol was held. No progress was made in the attack on Modlin and about Kutno.

But, on the 14th, the Narew was crossed near Modlin. Between Ostrow and Mazowiecke 6,000 Poles were captured. The small frontier fortress of Osowiec fell and the Germans advanced towards Bialystok. The whole of the northern flank seemed to be crumbling. An armoured detachment even penetrated the neighbourhood of Brest-Litovsk, which had only recently ceased to be the Polish General Headquarters. At Radom, the small force of Poles, who had been penned in against the river by one of Hoth's armoured columns, was captured. Farther south, the position looked worse than ever. Zamosc and Rawa Ruska, towns behind the line of the San, were both attacked. On the following day, Warsaw was cut off, for the Germans were in the suburb of Prague. But part of Bortnowski's army entered the capital, taking with them 1,000 prisoners. They did not achieve this without severe fighting; but, at this late hour in the campaign they showed their mettle by cutting through the thin line investing the capital on the west and entered it with the feeling of victory. But, on the south, List continued his advance, though it was now directed towards the south of Lwow with the object of cutting off Poland from Ruthenia and Rumania. Drohobycz, Boryslaw and Haslo fell on this day. On the 16th fell Bialystok in the north and Przemyśl in the south and there was brisk fighting about Brest, but the force about Kutno was still resisting gallantly, after a week, against the pressure of overwhelming odds.

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If the position is examined objectively at this moment, in spite of the boasting of the Germans, in spite of their very impressive successes, it will be noticed that the most dangerous-looking movements, i.e. those to the east of the San and Vistula, Reichenau's unit at Lublin and List's at Zamosc and Rawa Ruska, represented the work of motorized detachments which were in peril of being cut off. It does not seem very improbable that the Poles could have dealt with them and also cleared the line of the Vistula, reinforced Warsaw and restored a line to the Pinsk Marshes.

But it was not to be. On the following day Russia crossed the Polish eastern frontier; and it was all over. It was impossible for any nation to withstand attack by Germany and Russia at the same time; and though this tragedy of Poland ended with a note of farce it is better for her that it ended that way. Russia only came in when the Polish resistance seemed to be broken, when the Germans had publicly claimed it was broken. But, judging it more objectively, the German claim had not been made good; and Poland has the consolation of being able to maintain with some real evidence that neither Germany nor Russia defeated her. She succumbed to a joint attack. It was five days before Lwow surrendered to the Russians. General Bortnowski gave in the day before. Warsaw still held out. On the 20th, the garrison even made a sortie towards the west, in an endeavour to relieve Bortnowski; but it had not the strength to break through. Four days later, it was completely hemmed in by an advance south of Modlin. But it was not until the 28th, after twenty days of heroic resistance, that the capital surrendered to General Blascowitz. The following day an agreement was signed for the partition of Poland between Germany and Russia; and, on October the

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5th, Herr Hitler took his triumph in the Polish capital and committed the country to the terrible mercies of German rule.

Gdynia, the purely Polish port of Danzig, was captured on September the 14th; but the small garrison on the fortified Hel peninsula held out under Admiral Unrug until the 29th. The Poles had courage beyond measure; and they had also fighting ability. How then did it come about that they were so easily defeated?

Some of the reasons have already been suggested; and if there seems no escape from a criticism of the Polish High Command it must at least be remembered that the Germans in much less time broke through the Allied front at Sedan, in the following May, and by the end of the month had put the northern armies in such a plight that evacuation was their only means of escape. Yet it is quite clear that even with its vulnerable strategic position Poland might have been expected to avoid defeat much longer. It is true that her representatives at Versailles had attempted to secure a veto on the militarization of East Prussia. At that time such a provision may have seemed superfluous in view of the demilitarization of the Rhineland; but when Germany once more took full control of the Rhineland, the position became at a stroke gravely different. This was so obvious that on the 7th of March 1936, when this event took place, the Poles urged France to march against Germany with their support. Britain, on being consulted by France disapproved of the action. But the position was changed to the disadvantage of Poland; and it became worse when, in March 1939, Germany seized Bohemia and Moravia. It was made critical when, on August the 21st, the German-Soviet Pact was announced.

Until the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia the Polish Staff had felt reasonably satisfied that they could deal with a

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German offensive, which would have been confined to an advance from East Prussia, combined with another on the Polish western frontier as far south as Cracow. They designed to meet such a position by striking at East Prussia immediately, and, after overrunning it and thereby shortening their front, marching into Pomerania under cover of a strong force holding their western front. The plan looks so attractive that it might be asked why at least part of it was not attempted. The reasons were that the changed situation on her southern flank necessitated a completely different outlook, and, of course, the crucial fact that Germany struck on the second day of the Polish mobilization. The result was that instead of being able to place a force of between three and four million men in the field she was only able to use one million.

Even so, it must be said that the High Command did not make the best use of their forces. It has already been suggested that the dispositions offended against the principle of economy of force. Two of the armies, those of Dab-Biernacki and Piskor, with 8 infantry divisions, the solitary motorized brigade and 1 cavalry brigade, were left with no clearly defined role and intervened very little. Once more, the Polish Army had 10 cavalry brigades; if these had been used for a raid in East Prussia at the opening of the struggle they might have caused sufficient confusion to check the development of the German plan. Even in the Great War, Moltke had withdrawn divisions from the western front at a critical moment, largely because of the sensitiveness of this part of Germany to invasion. The cavalry might have been of some use, whereas when on one occasion they charged an armoured detachment their gallantry almost touched the absurd. Moreover, the attempts to march into Slovakia and Moravia, under the impression that they

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would provoke a sympathetic rising were, unreasonable; and Kutrzebe's raids into Germany had not even this justification.

The High Command were not prepared for the type of war they were compelled to face. They had been warned by their intelligence service, and, of course, the German tactics of using many tanks, with aeroplanes flying ahead to direct them along the line of least resistance and low-flying planes to accompany them, were as old as the last war. They were tried out at Fricourt in February by the British, who had invented the tank. But the temptation to judge the High Command too harshly on this account breaks upon the fact that, months afterwards, the Allies had made no better provision for precisely the same tactics; and they paid more heavily. One other criticism of the High Command, however, must be made. Not only did it offend against the principle of economy of force in its dispositions: it showed also a sad grasp of the possibilities of its wretched frontiers. The Carpathians present a much better chance to the defence than to an advance, especially in passes which will take heavy traffic; and it should not have been impossible to hold these with comparatively moderate forces. As it happened, the passes in the western sector were forced almost at once. The two armies which had the defence of the Carpathians, those of Szylling and Fabrycy, were not in any case sufficient for their task. The former had his hands full in attempting to cover Cracow and the industrial triangle of Polish Silesia. This left Fabrycy, with his two divisions, for the Carpathian front; and List, his opponent, had 6 infantry divisions and 3 mechanized divisions. A first-rate general with a well-thought out plan might still have held the passes. There is no evidence that either condition was fulfilled.

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The inferiority in armament is also attributable to the High Command. The Polish Army was at an immense disadvantage in dealing with the Germans. The latter placed 14 mechanized divisions in the field. the Poles had only one motorized brigade. The Germans had ample supplies of automatic arms, anti-tank guns, anti-aircraft guns and, of course, aeroplanes. The Poles were short of all. The Germans used between 2,000 and 3,000 aeroplanes, including over 1,000 bombers. The Poles had only a few hundred aeroplanes, including some 40 or 50 bombers; and some of these were caught on the ground when the Germans set out, in the early morning of September the 1st, to bomb the Polish aerodromes.

One of the greatest of the Polish handicaps was the presence of what came later to be known as the 'Fifth Column'. In Poland, with its big infusion of German inhabitants, the peril was greater than anywhere except Holland. Spies and sympathizers appeared to be everywhere. Headquarters were bombed wherever they went. At times German bombers, when brought down, were found to contain German young men who had never aroused any sort of suspicion while they lived with their parents in Poland. It was probably thanks to their assistance that at the very beginning of the invasion all the main centres were bombed. The thirty-six towns that suffered in this way included almost every nodal point in the country.

There is one final point that at least contributed to the rapid defeat of Poland. The Command appeared to refuse all the advice of friendly soldiers who only wished to help them. The Allied mission was kept securely in the background, unable to do anything except look on at a distance at the developing tragedy. When all these points are considered, it seems that the really astonishing feature of the

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Polish resistance is that it continued so long. Only heroic courage, of an obstinacy very rarely met with anywhere and quite unexpected in the Poles, can account for their refusal, on so many occasions, as at Kutno, to admit that they were beaten; and this inference strengthens the conclusion that they might still have recovered and held out at least for several months if the Russians had not stabbed them in the back when they were regaining their self-possession.

As it was, General Kleeberg's Army Corps was only put out of action on October the 6th, and guerilla fighting by small groups continued as late as the following April.

A great part of the campaign consisted of detached anonymous struggles of heroic men with no sort of adequate equipment to meet the best-provided army in the world. Human courage is no match for the internal combustion engine and yet it showed so well on such disadvantageous terms that the French Army, failing to recognize the superb bravery, discounted the tactics to their own ruin.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Strategy of the War*

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**T**he strategy of the war was conditioned by the state of the combatants, their standpoints, and their objectives. Germany had been prepared for the war to some extent since the advent of Hitler to power. As we have seen, he rose on a wave of reaction to Communism, a real reaction to a real threat, and of a reaction to the mood of depression from the defeat in the Great War. National Socialism was a real solution to a real malaise. The development of capitalistic society finds few defenders. It finds in fact, its best defence in the conviction that it is everywhere passing and giving place to something better; and this obviously is no logical defence at all. It is merely the approval of the better state towards which men are groping. The real difference arose as to the type of solution. In Portugal a means had been found of laying the foundations on the basis of the Papal Encyclicals. In Russia the basis was what was called communism. In Germany another solution was found lying a little nearer the Italian Fascist model, but with a characteristic infusion deriving from the difference in her immediate history.

It was this latter element that shaped the development of Germany in the years after Hitler's capture of the supreme power; and from the first it took the form of a *risorgi-*



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*mento*, a political rising towards a position which though not disclosed was always latent in the mind of Hitler. Accordingly, rearmament was pushed ahead as rapidly as seemed expedient, having regard to the need of concealment, while the process, if certainly known, might have led to its being challenged by France before it dare risk the challenge. When the war broke out, therefore, Germany had an immensely greater proportion of her potential force mobilized for action than the Allies. The Germans had been encouraged to choose guns in preference to butter, and the Government had undoubtedly given them the guns in abundance and had, as certainly, restricted the butter. Tanks had been created by the thousand. There were vast numbers of aeroplanes. Motorized transport was lavished on the army; and the whole war machine was elaborated. There were great stores of all the commodities necessary for warfare on the modern model. heavy oils and petrol in underground storage tanks, great accumulations of iron and various metals, stores of food. If these were not greater than they were it was because to the end Germany had not anticipated that Britain would enter the fight; but provision had nevertheless been made for such an eventuality with the assumption that the war would be short.

It was in this way that Germany hoped to evade the operation of British sea power. No purely military nation can ever take in the full implication of sea power; but Germany had made the best provision she could to deal with it for the short period she expected to experience its pressure. She hoped to sink a sufficient number of mercantile and naval vessels by means of her pocket battleships, her submarines and her aeroplanes; and for the rest felt confident of ending the war before she could suffer its worst effects.

For Germany, therefore, it was necessary to get to grips

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with her enemy at the earliest safe moment; and, after buying off Russia, she crushed Poland in order to be able to give her whole attention to the west, where, she correctly reasoned, the decision must take place. Her armies had still some weakness through the interval between the operation of the Versailles Treaty and her resumption of conscription. In fully-trained non-commissioned officers, and junior officers she was definitely deficient. Hence, though everything depended upon an early decision, she saw the advantage of a period of rest from major operations while she devoted herself to further training and husbanded her resources for the great test. If Hitler had had his way it is possible this period would have been shorter, but sufficient resistance by the soldiers prevailed upon him to wait.

The position of the Allies was essentially different. They had only a small proportion of their strength mobilized at the outbreak of war. A democracy always resents making elaborate preparations for war in advance. The unreasonableness of war is transferred to warlike preparations. In France, this point of view could never have the vogue it acquired in Britain. France stands too near the enemy and has been invaded three times in seventy years. Preparation was rightly regarded as a natural insurance, but even there expenditure was cut down. The Air Force, which, for its size, was as good as any in Europe, was starved, so that at the outbreak of war it was numerically inferior to that of Britain, which had begun preparation only recently; and both together had not half the number of first-line machines that Germany could put into the field. The position with regard to tanks and all the other apparatus of war was somewhat similar.

In Britain the position was infinitely worse. Only in respect of aeroplanes was it at all encouraging. Machines

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and pilots were of the best; but there were far too few. The tank had been invented in Britain. It was British soldiers who had first used the tank in conjunction with low-flying aeroplanes. It was they who had first devised the armoured division, and, in fact, the German Panzer division was founded on the British model. Yet at the outbreak of war there were only sufficient tanks and motorized transport for about three divisions; and the tank had developed hardly at all from the early models. It had been left to the Germans to adopt English ideas and elaborate them, to build the heavier tanks which were later to cause such disorder to the Allied ranks, to create such an abundance of armoured vehicles and so to drill their troops in co-operation between them and the low-flying aeroplanes that for some time these tactics held a supremacy on the battlefield. Under the absurd slogan that 'War solves nothing', next to nothing was done to prepare for an eventuality which for at least three years before the outbreak of war was seen to be increasingly inevitable.

Yet the Allies' war potential was immense, though it needed time for its realization. Accordingly, the strategy of the war for the Allies necessarily involved a period of the defensive. This was realized quite clearly in France, where it was seen that the French could not safely take the offensive or face a war of movement against an enemy potentially more numerous. But the adoption of the alternative led to a completely different mentality. The elaborate Maginot line seemed to promise an effective check on the invader; and, behind it, the French hoped to gain time to mobilize the resources of the Allies. The Maginot Line did not, however, cover the whole of the frontier. It went as far as the western boundary of Luxembourg and was then completed on the Belgian frontier by an improvised series

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of works. This might have seemed well enough but for the fact that the strategy fostered a mental attitude which almost led to defeat.

The idea of the Maginot Line bred the notion of an impregnable defence. This was transferred to the whole of the defensive system, including the much weaker coastal sector. It is, of course, true that the organic defensive as developed from French ideas in the Great War by Lossberg under Ludendorff was immensely strong. But its central idea was that no defence is of itself impregnable. It depended for its efficacy on the immediate reaction of troops held in readiness beyond the range of the enemy artillery, through counter-attack, and for the organized and elaborate counter-attack in case the enemy contrived to secure a firm grip upon the advanced zone. That is to say, it involved the fundamental recognition that it is men and not machines or devices that defend, as it is men and not machines that succeed in attack. It was, in fact, active, not passive defence, offensive defensive and not defensive offensive.

But this was insufficiently mechanical for the true intellectual, who construed it as meaning that the attacker must have a superiority of men and machines of three to one to succeed. Every attempt to reduce the 'fearful and impassioned drama' which is war to mechanics is doomed to failure. The human spirit constantly defies all odds; and in the matter of warlike operations disaster may come from ignoring this fact of experience. Before the war a certain school of thinkers had popularized the slogan of 'the supremacy of the defensive'; and since on the mechanical theory there could be no victory without a superiority of three to one, the position was one of predestined 'stalemate'. Germany could not muster three to one of the Allies; and still less could the latter mobilize three times the number of the

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Germans This was a novel application of democracy to solve the question of victory or defeat, world power or downfall, on a numbering of heads.

The development was merely an unconscious by-product of pacifism; and, if it had been confined to the intelligentsia, it would have mattered little. Unfortunately, it infected a group of soldiers among the Allies. They were not deliberately converted to it, but it had its influence over that part of the mind which governs automatic reaction and instinctive response. The defensive seemed to be effective of itself, and there grew up an increasing train of sequels—carelessness about the human side of defence, about the adoption of expedients conducing to its effectiveness, about alternatives, about the possibility or necessity of taking the offensive. The Allies entered the war with something of this outlook; and so, at a crucial moment, General Gamelin forgot to provide for a crucial sector of the extension of the Maginot Line, a breach was at once made in it, and the Allies were not able to check the impetus of the Germans until they were within sight of defeat.

It was because of this obsession with the defensive that for some months, while Germany was preparing her great offensive against the western front, it was almost an impiety to suggest that she had as much as considered such a plan. Yet it was inevitable. In her strategy the offensive was as much canonized as was the defensive in that of the Allies. It involved a short period of waiting, since a few months of good campaigning weather were desirable though not actually necessary. When the new tactics were seen to be so successful in Poland, Hitler formed his timetable; and, after the overrunning of Holland, he appeared to be certain that he would have secured a decision by the middle of August.

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The rival strategies were so clearly marked out by their objectives and conditions that it was obvious how they should proceed. Germany had simply to increase the tempo of her preparations as far as they would bear increase, to train her mobilized millions as thoroughly as possible and to import or seize sufficient of the commodities which were vital to the full operation of her war machine. All this she did. When it was realized that the economic war was being waged with determination and with the full use of every expedient allowed by international law, Goring was given even completer powers of economic control. Yet the German winter had been bad, and when it seemed likely that the supplies of iron ore were to be cut off, Hitler decided to kill two birds with one stone and invade Denmark and Norway. He hoped thereby to secure stocks of cellulose for explosive, of metals for armaments, of oil for his motorized transport and aeroplanes, and of food. In varying quantities he secured his ends. He exercised his aeroplanes in raids over the North Sea and trained his troops behind the front.

While Hitler was thus acting according to his strategy the Allies were languishing in an orgy of wish-fulfilment. I have said that democracies resent expenditure on armaments; but the action of the Allies was almost beyond belief. They allowed themselves to be persuaded by the soothsayers that Hitler dare not attack for fear of the huge casualties he must suffer. They were content to believe that he had suffered much more in Poland than he admitted, which was obvious, but did not reflect that with a people completely at the mercy of his propaganda he could suppress any inconvenient truth and suggest any convenient one. They saw, quite correctly, that the Allies must win if they were given time to mobilize their complete resources. And so, under the influence of these truths, half-truths and illu-

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sions, they proceeded only a little faster than they had done before the war. The navy was perfectly efficient and could be trusted to get on with its job. There were no raiders loose on the seas. The submarine had failed to beat the convoy, the aeroplane required almost a campaign to sink a warship and damaged even the merchantmen little; all was well. Aeroplane production should have been speeded up at almost any cost, but all that was done was to accelerate the production slightly.

Worst of all, there seems to have been little disposition to use the gifts for which the Allies were famous, their skill in invention. In the first months, there is no evidence that a single constructive idea was produced on the Allied side. It seemed sufficient that they had supplied all the guiding ideas for the war, the tactics of infiltration, the use of tanks with low-flying aeroplanes and the elastic defensive in depth. For the rest, the splendid British Army, which for its size was superior to any armed force in the world, was set to hold stretches of the defensive line when it was so fine an offensive instrument. One thing only was done. In the Great War the Regular Army had almost disappeared by the end of November. To the end of the war Britain suffered from the loss of experienced leaders. The new British Expeditionary Force was not made up in the same way. Many of the officers and non-commissioned officers were taken to form the nucleus of the new battalions; and the ranks were not filled up with the trained reservists but with militia and recruits. Cadres and a stiffening of experienced troops were thus provided for the new armies. But if the Allies were attempting to show that democracies cannot make war they were acting admirably. Their strategy was perfectly correct, except for the latent assumption that somehow the war could be won without the bitter fighting

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that must be the essence of war against a race which in spite of its culture is still primitive.

The one direction in which they carried out their strategy effectively was the economic warfare. In order that they should mobilize their full resources they assumed complete control of the highways of the sea and drew material reinforcement from every quarter of the globe. The British Navy, acting unseen, was never challenged in the first nine months of the war. Through its influence, a vice was clamped down on German imports of all sorts. A blockade is impracticable under modern conditions. The blockading squadron cannot stand close enough to check ingress or egress effectively without running risks which were unheard of when the blockade flourished. The risks from mines, submarines, aeroplanes and shore guns effectively keep blockading squadrons at a distance. Moreover, the idea upon which the blockade is founded has passed for ever. If all the squadrons of the world held the seas off the coasts of Germany, for instance, she could quite happily exist and carry on active warfare. The blockade was effective only when a strip of territory existed on the imports and exports of its immediate hinterland. With the development of long-distance railways, of the re-export trade, of credit and all the intricate relationships of the modern world, it would be completely ineffective unless it controlled neutral trade.

Moreover the blockade carried different privileges and restrictions. The breach of a blockade involved the certain loss of the ship and the loss of the cargo also, if there were presumptive evidence that the master of the ship knew of the existence of the blockade at the time of sailing.

What is called the allied 'blockade' is carried out quite differently and under a different statute and case law. It is



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governed by the law of *contraband* and the main pre-requisite for its recognition is that it must be based upon effective command of the sea and be therefore stable and universal and not spasmodic and arbitrary in the control it exercises. This, of course, is the essential condition of the exercise of all just law. As a fact, the economic war which the Allies waged against Germany, while having these characteristics, was founded upon a complex of case law and reprisal. The long and involved historic discussions on contraband had at least shown that almost anything could be treated as contraband. *The Declaration of London* distinguished three categories of goods: (1) things exclusively used in war which can be treated as absolute contraband without notice; (2) other articles used exclusively in war which can be treated as absolute contraband by notification to the Powers; and (3) articles of multiple use, such as food, fodder, powder, barbed-wire, field-glasses, etc., which can be treated as conditional contraband and therefore legally subject to capture if it can be shown that they are destined for (a) armed forces of the enemy, (b) Government departments or contractors for such departments, or (c) a fortified place or enemy base.

It will be seen that almost anything might be gathered into a net as wide as that; and it was not found wide enough. During the Great War the British Government established a number of departments to deal with this matter. There was first of all the Blockade Department of the Foreign Office, and there was also the War Trade Intelligence Department, which was mainly staffed by dons. The apparatus therefore lay ready to hand when the war broke out; and Germany, by setting all law and custom at defiance, very aptly played into the hands of the Allies. The method of her submarine warfare broke even with the con-

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vention she had recently signed. And so it came about that not many months had passed before even exports were being controlled. Exports cannot be contraband, though in a real blockade they were stopped as much as imports. International law provides for retaliation provided there is lawful occasion and the retaliation is proportioned to the breach of the law. The stoppage of Germany's exports was declared by Order in Council of the 27th of November 1939, the immediate cause being the indiscriminate laying of mines, a breach of the Hague Convention of 1907. Germany had also broken the Submarine Protocol of 1936 and persistently violated the Declaration of Paris by sinking merchant vessels irrespective of their flags or cargoes.

In the early months of the war food was treated as conditional contraband. About 14 per cent of the commodities seized during the first two months were foodstuffs, though more than half of that amount could also have been used for the manufacture of munitions, because of their fat content. The economic war also acted indirectly against foodstuffs by preventing the import of fertilizers, fats and oil. It struck at rubber, and, although Germany manufactured a substitute for rubber, it is not so good and wears less well. The effect of cutting off a commodity even when there is a manufactured substitute is still felt, since the manufacture uses up labour and plant. In a war which aims at producing a universal shortage this call upon plant and labour is not to be ignored. Among other commodities at which the economic war struck are vegetable and animal oil; minerals such as iron ore, bauxite for the supply of aluminium; nickel; copper, cotton and wool; mineral oils and petrol.

During the year 1939 Germany imported less than 15 per cent of her cereals and about half of that could not be touched by the blockade. With normal harvests she could

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carry on. But nearly half of the maize and mixed cereals which form the food for cattle were cut off. This means that the meat position must deteriorate. She was cut off from about 95 per cent of her normal import of vegetable oils. The food position was hit again; and also the soap supply. And even the shortage of soap was bitterly felt.

She was cut off from only about 10 per cent of her iron ore; but very early the shortage of aluminium made itself felt and the situation was not changed until France surrendered. Two-thirds of her nickel was cut off, and nickel is an essential ingredient of steel. Much of her copper and manganese were cut off. Practically all her cotton and jute and three-quarters of wool come from countries which lie within the power of the 'blockade'. All her natural rubber was in the same position.

But the blockade weighed most heavily upon her supplies of mineral oil and high-grade petrol such as is used for aeroplanes. Germany has devoted much research to the production of petrol from coal and she can produce about two million tons annually. But, in 1938 she imported two-thirds of her oils and petroleum from abroad and about half of it came from countries controlled by the Allied blockade. Then, she used 8 to 9 million tons a year; but active warfare of the type upon which she relied for victory would probably consume from 16 to 20 million tons. For such warfare she would require to import from 12 to 16 million tons per annum. From Rumania she could not get enough; and it is doubtful if Russia produces anything like enough to meet such a demand. Even if she did, she has not the transport to deliver it.

Germany had reserves of oil and petrol at the outbreak of the war; but it is very doubtful if she had more than six months' supply. It is, therefore, obvious that everything

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depended upon contriving to secure a decision in the shortest possible time; and the Allies' strategy, on the other hand, involved carrying on the war until the blockade could take effect and they could realize their own resources to take the counter-offensive. Each strategy had its characteristic risks. The Germans were bound to stake all upon a throw; and this, while it promises to gather the best results, involves the risk of complete defeat. But it seems a more promising strategy than that of the Allies, which might lead them to drag out the war until they were plunged into economic ruin. With the German strategy there went also a complete contempt for anything that seemed to impose a check upon the realization of their plan, and with the Allies' strategy a tendency to defer to neutrals, complaints about interference. Such deference weakened the instrument on which they depended for the chance of victory.

It will be realized that the strategy of the Allies was not really so flexible as that of Germany. When the moral balance of her people ran down, in spite of all artificial respiration, Germany could look about her, decide upon some defenceless neutral and seizing it magnify it into the appearance of a major victory. The Allies could not do that. Their *casus belli* was the very invasion of the rights of the defenceless. They had to act according to the prescriptions of international law and they suffered continuously from the loss of prestige that followed each fresh application of German initiative. They seemed to be passive, slow-moving and impotent. Their advantage in peace, the need to submit every important action to the full and open discussion of the people, was their disadvantage in war, in which almost everything depends upon swiftness and secrecy of decision. Only the end could crown such a work and the Allies could but maintain their confidence in that.

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The economic war was carried out by the Allied fleets at first, and later by the British fleet alone. The British Empire entered the war with the following naval equipment:

- 15 Capital ships
- 7 Aircraft-carriers
- 62 Cruisers
- 185 Destroyers
- 58 Submarines
- 108 Minesweepers, sloops, patrol  
vessels and gunboats.

Almost at once a large programme of naval building was put in hand and the Navy began a motley brood of nondescript ships. But the backbone of the navy continued to be the capital ship, the ship of the line, as it would have been called in earlier times. The ship of the line was the vessel that did the real fighting; the cruiser, which was only invented about a century ago, when it was called the frigate, was its scout. Its role was to observe, act as advance guard and protect the sea routes. The ship of the line was the power in reserve, always ready to give battle and so enable the lighter ships (and, of course, the whole mercantile marine) to go about their lawful avocations in security. It had to be big enough and sufficiently armed to meet the biggest and most heavily armed ship of the enemy. It was in fact, the foundation upon which sea power rested; and so it remains to-day.

It was inevitable that one nation should try to get the better of another by building bigger and more powerful ships. Wood gave place to iron and iron to steel; sail yielded to steam. Heavy plates of stronger and stronger metal were riveted about the ships' sides and over their decks; bigger and bigger guns which would carry farther

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and do more damage were devised, so that the nation's ships should be invulnerable and yet able to destroy any competitor. The process seems interminable. The size of battleships is purely a matter of agreement among the Powers. If they will not or cannot agree, there seems no reason why ships of 80,000 or 100,000 tons should not appear. If one nation builds them, others will follow. But the apparent absurdity of this position should not blind us to the fact that the battleship is still the strongest surface ship, whatever its size, and all the talk of battleships being obsolete is merely a confusion of thought. The battleship is always obsolete and never will be. The torpedo made it obsolete; the torpedo-boat made it obsolete, so did the submarine, and, of course, the aeroplane.

There will always be a ship that can hit harder than any other and stand harder hitting than any other; and that ship is the *battleship*. It would save our purses quite a lot if they could be smaller, for the latest battleships cost about six million pounds. But the function which the battleship plays is one that must exist in all navies. The battleships of the moment have a tonnage of 35,000 or more; they carry, perhaps, nine 16-inch guns firing a shell the best part of a ton; they have an armour belt of 14 inches of hard steel and can steam at about 23 knots. At one time they used to carry a sort of crinoline net as a protection against torpedoes, but it was found to be impracticable when the vessel was in motion, so now they have a sort of bulge or false bottom instead. No battleship was sunk by daylight destroyer action during the Great War, and not one was hit by a submarine. As for aeroplanes these have so far to achieve their first success with a battleship prepared for action. They present a very small target, and their anti-aircraft defences do not make them an easy mark. Their decks, moreover, are

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armoured. It would probably take several torpedoes to sink one. The best chance is to drop a torpedo close to the battleship, so timed that it will explode under the vessel; and this is not easy.

Such is the battleship; but as we have seen there are a variety of weapons designed to destroy them, and their speed is such that they cannot very easily run after or away from their enemy unless these should be other battleships. So when they go out to fight they do not go unattended. They can fire shells almost at the limit of vision—some of their shells have a range of 30,000 yards. But they require other vessels to find the enemy for them, and hence the frigate or cruiser, as we call it now.

The *cruiser* has evolved a number of types. In the last war there were four of them employed—the armoured cruiser, the protected cruiser, the light cruiser and the battle cruiser. All but the last two have now been discarded. They suffered badly in the last war and as they had played their part in evolving the more useful types they were allowed to perish. The armoured cruiser was at one time so formidable that the battle cruiser was designed to deal with it and to be faster than anything afloat except a destroyer, and with an armament second only to that of the battleship. In the last war they did magnificent service. The two fine fighting ships of the German fleet, after the commander of one of which the unhappy *Graf Spee* was named, were brought to action and sunk without a chance of retaliation. They were outranged and out-gunned and they had not the speed to escape.

But, in evolving the type, it was thought that they would be able to break through the screen of the enemy's cruisers and so lay bare the battle fleet. They were not able to do that; but the battle cruisers of to-day may be able to do it,

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for they are much more powerful. According to the German reports I believe we no longer have any; but they are still there. The *Hood* has a tonnage of 41,290, a speed of 32 knots, an armour belt of 12 inches, and eight 15-inch guns. This means that it has a tremendously greater power than even battleships dreamed of a generation ago. Its cost of course six million pounds. The *Renown* and *Repulse* are slightly faster, but have only about two-thirds of the tonnage and are not so heavily protected, but they, too, are most powerful and the pocket battleships would have no chance with them.

Besides the battle cruisers there are a number of smaller cruisers. What Britain chiefly needs is an immense supply of small fast cruisers with sufficient armament to deal summarily with destroyers, and with the speed to find and hold them. Their role is manifold. It is they which police the seas; and as British commerce is to be found on all the seas we can hardly have too many. But we have never had enough. Throughout naval history commanders have complained of the shortage of this type of warship, but when I say this I mean the true cruiser, not the battle cruiser, which is in effect a hybrid type intermediate between the battleship and the scouting, commerce-protecting frigate.

Yet somehow there has always been a confusion in our cruiser programmes. The United States insists on building a large type of ship with a tonnage of 10,000, and, of course, the Admiralty feels the distraction of that decision. Ideally we should have as many 10,000-ton ships as any other navy, because we must have as powerful an equipment as any other nation; and since we are bound to concentrate our most powerful vessels in the neighbourhood of Britain, it would be safer for us to be able to detach a sufficient number of vessels of the same tonnage to guard the trade routes.



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There has, therefore, been some tendency to follow the development of this type of cruiser in spite of the general design to limit cruiser types to two—the battle cruiser and the light cruiser.

There are, therefore, a number of cruisers of a tonnage round about 10,000 with an armament of 8-inch guns and a larger number of smaller vessels with only 6-inch guns and a tonnage of round about 5,000. The two types were engaged in the battle of the River Plate. The *Exeter* had 8-inch guns and the *Ajax* and *Achilles* 6-inch. Both, however, rank as light cruisers in contradistinction to the battle cruisers. The school of naval thinkers who tend to regard the battleship as an obsolete type will in future point to the magnificent action of the two light cruisers against the pocket battleship. But it must be pointed out that when the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* met the *Invincible* and *Inflexible* in the battle of the Falklands they were not allowed to dictate the lines on which the battle was fought. The British admiral had and retained the initiative and permitted the German ships neither to run away nor to close with him. There are many elements of difference between the two battles; but in both the more powerful ship could only allow the weaker to get within range by surrendering all his superiority. It still remains to be seen whether a tactician as capable and as bold in command of a pocket battleship could not have produced a completely opposite result.

The advocate of the small ship will maintain that if he is given the speed he will take and retain the initiative and the more powerful vessel will generally be beaten if it is attacked by more than one of the small fast cruisers. This is perhaps a barren controversy. It seems to me that with equal gunnery the vessel with the more powerful armament, provided it is powerful enough, must prevail. The

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shell from an 11-inch gun should blow the smaller vessel out of the water if it is correctly placed.

Yet these smaller ships are of the utmost value as scouts, advance guards and protective screen in actual battle. The immunity of the battle fleet from destruction by torpedo attack must be attributed to them. They are sufficiently bigger to head off destroyer attacks and to maintain contact with the battle fleet, and in fact in securing immunity to the capital ships they assure them mobility. The battleship must fight at a distance. At close quarters, even with the help of all its protective arrangements, it is vulnerable. In the battle of Jutland the *Marlborough* was struck by a torpedo and at once developed a list. Her speed was reduced, she had to fall out of the line and later limped into the Humber under destroyer escort.

The *destroyer* is the next type of naval vessel. It is the hunter and the handyman of the navy. It may have a tonnage up to about 1,400 and flotilla leaders have a heavier tonnage still. They may have a speed of 36 knots, i.e. nearly 42 miles per hour. They are armed with 4.7 guns, most of them carry eight of them, and they have generally four torpedo tubes. They form part of the outer screen of the fleet in action, and, apart from the motor torpedo boat, are the fastest vessels afloat. They are the special craft used for convoys, and, as they have specially to deal with submarines on such and other occasions, they carry depth charges. When they are engaged in a submarine hunt they move round in ever widening circles, dropping depth charges, and a submarine in the neighbourhood will have to call on all its luck if it is to see the surface again. The destroyer has its disadvantages. It can normally only remain at sea for as many days as the battleship can weeks. But it costs only about £500,000 and is so useful that every

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fleet has numbers of them. A few years ago we had 50 per cent more than any other country and probably the margin is much greater now.

There is only one other type of surface vessel which is, strictly speaking, attached to the fleet. This is the aircraft-carrier. The function of these vessels is sufficiently well known. They are, in effect, floating aerodromes, and it is on them depends the fleet air arm, though, of course, most of the cruisers apart from the smallest carry one or two catapults and aeroplanes.

One other type of naval vessel belongs to the fleet and may take part in fleet actions. This is the *submarine* and it may vary in size from 136 feet, with a tonnage of 250, to over 300 feet and nearly 2,000 tons. The French Navy had even some with a tonnage of 3,000. The speed may be as much as 16 knots on the surface, but under actual fighting conditions the speed falls about two knots. With the modern improvements in the Diesel engine a submarine of about only 700 tons could operate almost anywhere. These vessels are in their internal arrangements almost like jig-saw puzzles. Space is so cramped that life is burdensome to the crew. But in any case it would be difficult for a submarine to remain submerged more than 48 hours even with the most careful use of oxygen. But when the submarine is in perfect condition it can run about that length of time at slow speed (9 knots or so) under water by means of electric motors working from storage batteries. In general, submarine commanders come to the surface long before this to re-charge the batteries and give the crew air.

The submarine has, of course, numerous uses, some of them of the utmost value. It can, and actually does, penetrate into waters where no surface vessel dare appear. It is, in fact, the distant eye of the navy, and keeps continuous

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secret watch on movements at the German bases. During the last war, it will be remembered, submarines dived under the mines in the Dardanelles and suddenly appeared before Constantinople; they also invaded the Baltic. Already we know of the extraordinary exploits of our submarines during the present war, and it seems as if one of them must have put an end to the pocket battleship which sank the gallant *Rarwalpindi*.

The main normal offensive weapon of the submarine is the torpedo, and ordinarily it has six to eight torpedo tubes, each loaded with a torpedo. Where there is space one or more spare torpedoes is carried for each tube. If completely submerged the submarine is blind, but it can see by means of a periscope when not too far below the surface. The torpedo is, in effect, a shell provided with the means of independent motion. At the moment of discharge it has a speed higher than that of any destroyer. Generally the forward part of a vessel is aimed at, and in the ordinary submarine the majority of the torpedo tubes are at the fore end. In any sort of sea the merchant ship loses speed much less than the submarine and the gun that it carries is extremely difficult to sight. Indeed the submarine and its particular kind of work are among the wonders of the navy. Nowadays a moving submarine, even when it is submerged, can be detected by careful instruments on the naval craft it threatens. Then it is hunted down by means of depth charges, in appearance like oil drums, which are shot out by a small gun. At best these charges put out the lighting arrangements and throw machinery out of gear, at worst they blow in the bulkheads and the submarine perishes. Some submarines are adapted for minelaying and most of the work of this sort has been done by them.

There are, of course, surface vessels used for minelaying ;

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and international law recognizes the mine as a legitimate instrument of warfare. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the blockade could be carried out without them. But it is required by law that the position and exact extent of mine-fields should be publicly made known. Indiscriminate mine-laying is a barbarous form of warfare condemned by international law and by actual convention. Germany agreed, even recently, to abide by the ordinary rules which govern the sinking of merchantmen. Yet she has repeatedly broken her definite agreement and sunk them without first making provision for the safety of the crews.

There is one other main type of surface vessel associated with the navy which lives as dangerously as the most adventurous could wish and without the help of which neither merchantmen nor naval vessels could move about freely. The *minesweeper* is generally a small vessel with a shallow draught, say about 7 feet to 12 feet, with a speed of about 16 knots. At the end of the last war the navy had about 716 of them and the bulk of them were trawlers. The problem of the minesweeper is to cut off the mine from its box anchorage. From this it will be seen that the mine is generally laid in shallow waters near land; and it is so arranged that it lies about 15 feet below water. Mines to check submarines are, of course, anchored much deeper.

Minesweeping in its simplest form is carried out by two trawlers towing between them a wire. Stationed 500 yards or so apart they tow this wire through the mined waters. The depth is regulated by a sort of wooden box kite. The wire is about 1 inch in diameter and has a saw-like strand which cuts the mooring of the mine. The wire, of course, has to be watched continually to keep the requisite depth.

This is the simplest form of minesweeper. For narrow channels the minesweeper has a cable on each side sup-

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ported by a float with a flag (the *oropesa* it is called). The *paravane*, a torpedo-like object, is another device used in the same way. In this case the mine runs down the wire to the paravane, which cuts the mooring. When the moorings are cut the mines rise to the surface and are exploded from the vessels by rifle or machine-gun.

Such is the elaborate apparatus that carries out the executive side of the economic war. It has also to assure for British ships the unimpeded use of the sea so that the commodities necessary to support life or assist the operations of the other services may be brought safely to our shores, to cover the passage and assist an overseas army, and prevent invasion.

In carrying out the first of these duties in the face of enemy attack it has to be prepared to convoy merchantmen and this devolves upon the cruisers and destroyers. In the prevention of invasion, it must first of all be established in secure bases sufficiently near the ports from which a hostile flotilla may emerge and its average strength must be greater than that of any enemy force which may be concentrated against it. The great number of motor torpedo boats now in use play a definite part in the prevention of invasion, since with their high speed they can work havoc in the sort of flotilla of small boats that seems the likeliest form in which an invading force would attempt to land its troops.

Almost all the work of the navy is carried out unnoticed. It is only when an occasional brush occurs with an enemy ship that everyone realizes its power. But night and day its control of the seas goes on and it continues to strike its deadly blows against Germany. In the end the strategy of the war is reducible to the attempt of a land force to defeat sea power, and it is writing a new and immensely interesting appendix to Mahan.

## CHAPTER 5

### *All Quiet on the Western Front*

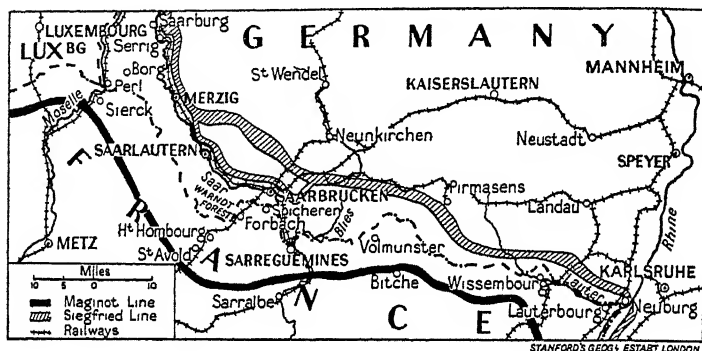
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While Poland was struggling very gallantly but unsuccessfully with the armies of Hitler the people of Britain became more and more impatient with the apparent failure to do anything to help their ally in his distress. They had all the frenzy of the convert; and, having at last committed themselves to war, they did not see why Poland should be making war alone. The Allied governments, with a surer appreciation of the difficulties of the situation, had attempted to persuade Russia to assist Poland; but they had been confronted with too many conditions to make any serious advance in that direction. If they had succeeded in making an arrangement with Russia there would have been no war—at all events at that moment. When Russia joined Germany, she not only cast her vote for war, she made it practically certain that Poland would go under.

Such considerations did not appeal to the British public. They had at length come to the point when the Government could ask of it almost anything and be sure of obtaining it. The Labour and Liberal parties, it is true, refused to enter the Government, and while they did so it was futile to blame the Cabinet for not making more progress with rearmament. While the trade unions remained aloof, the British

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war industry functioned with the brake still on. The nation was not yet thoroughly roused. But Britain is not analytical or logical, though it is generous, and the public became more and more restive when it perceived, or thought it perceived, complete inaction on the western front while Poland reeled under a succession of hammer blows. It did not



## 2. Area of the French operations in September 1939

recognize that the outlines of the campaign had already been laid down by the tremendous preparations of Germany from the year 1936 and that its own acquiescence in rearmament of the scale appropriate to the present war was much too recent to have any effect for at least a year or two. Even if some gleam of recognition did break in upon its mind, it failed to understand why the French, who had mobilized some five million men, did not create a diversion on the western front sufficient to draw off some at least of the force that was crushing Poland.

There was one other thing it ignored that was perhaps as vital. It did not realize that all the psychological effects of the past could not be wiped away in a moment. Indeed, at



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this very moment, the current disposition was to regard the Maginot Line as impregnable and with it the West Wall. The most popular description of the war was 'stalemate'; and the Americans came to apply a more popular and pungent description to it—'phoney'. It is important to realize that the Allies entered the war with these ideas. The French had built their Maginot Line and they became the prisoners of their own system. In the strictly military sense an impregnable fortress is inconceivable. The role of a fortress is to check, cover and delay. The Maginot Line as an organized chain of fortresses with zones of cross fire was immensely strong; but it was originally meant to do no more than cover French mobilization areas against a sudden attack without warning. While its various elements supported each other, several could fall without the rupture of the whole. Behind the flank sections, counter-attacks could be prepared against any attempt to advance through the gap.

But, unfortunately, the very elaborateness of the Maginot Line gradually led to soldiers as well as public, convinced of its impregnability, transferring that attribute to the West Wall (or 'Siegfried Line') and paying no attention to the character of an offensive that might break it. As a consequence, when the war broke out and General Gamelin, one of those concerned in designing the Maginot Line, found himself in chief command of the Allied armies with the necessity of doing something to create a diversion in favour of the Poles, it was inevitable he should advance with super-caution. It is unjust to blame his attitude without recognizing that the growth of pacifism clung tenaciously to the false doctrine of the impregnability of the defensive when it was routed elsewhere, and without remembering that Britain was so ignorant of the true nature

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of the position that, when some sound bombing of the German rear positions in the east would have thrown their communications into disorder and immensely heartened the Poles, it turned its bombers into colporteurs, distributing tracts over Germany. A German-American professor on his way from Germany to America described to the present writer what a stupid impression this made on the Germans when they were hearing daily of great victories.

The British Army destined for service overseas was, as Mr. Hore-Belisha said on the 9th of March 1939, a composite force consisting of 13 divisions, 6 of them Regular divisions, 3 of them armoured and 3 of them motorized. The first contingent was 154,000 strong and with its 26,000 vehicles it crossed to France without the loss of a single man. The French fortress troops assigned to the garrisoning of the Maginot Line were in position; but the general mobilization was not complete until the midnight of September the 20th-21st. This was another gain made by Hitler in striking without warning and another check upon General Gamelin. Yet the current military opinion in France was that the French advance, under the command of the first-rate tactician General Georges, had been full of promise and it had only been checked by the suddenness of the Polish collapse, which removed its immediate object.

The Germans left over 30 divisions to hold the West Wall against the French when they marched into Poland; and the position they were called upon to defend contemplated the loss of tactical points in the advance zone relying upon immediate counter-attack to arrest an advance into the battle zone. It was on the front between the Moselle and the Rhine that General Gamelin had determined to make his advance, and, particularly, in the area of the Saar which was so well known to the French and so valuable to

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the Germans because of its great industrial centres. The forces made contact on the day after the declaration of war and by September the 6th the advance units were across the frontier over the whole front. They made progress in the no-man's-land between the two defensive positions, mopping up machine-gun nests and coming into contact with the advanced field positions. The advance was carried out in so orderly and formidable a manner that large German reinforcements were sent to this area.

In their advance the French found evidence of extraordinary German ingenuity in creating obstacles. As the Germans retreated they destroyed field fortifications but left behind numerous land mines, which at first caused serious trouble. But though the main point of the advance was directed towards Saarbrücken the French with considerable skill launched attacks over the whole front and on the 8th there was furious fighting near Lauterburg, which lies near the point at which the Maginot Line leaves the Rhine to turn north-west towards the Moselle. On the following day the fighting increased in scale and intensity. The West Wall and the Maginot Lines were drawn some miles from the respective frontiers; but the latter followed the twists of the frontier more closely. On this sector the frontier made two salients towards the south. One of these, the more easterly, dipped towards the neighbourhood of Saarguemines and the other contained the Forest of Warndt which looked towards the road centre of Saint Avold.

It was the Forest of Warndt that the French attacked and, on the 9th, by a converging attack they captured the greater part of it. In their advance they met a variety of booby traps and numbers of contact land mines. Some of these were very small—about four times the size of a Mills bomb; but they were so numerous that on one battalion front alone

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they were found to number nearly three hundred. Some of them were patiently dug out; but a brilliant tactician had the idea of driving a flock of sheep in ahead of the advance. It was on this day that one of the French divisions acting on the left of the Forest of Warndt pushed ahead so brilliantly that the Germans were driven to deliver an immediate counter-attack. The French were operating now with heavy armoured units, which the Germans call divisions of 'rupture', and light divisions to follow up. One can only wonder what might have happened if such tactics had been used more resolutely, since they were much the same as the tactics that were later to break the French positions irreparably.

After a week of fighting on the western front the French were everywhere across the frontier and in German territory, and the Germans were driven to attack in their turn to stem the advance. On the 120-mile front between the Moselle and the Rhine the French had penetrated to an average depth of three miles and they held about 350 square miles of German territory. It sounded well, but it had hardly affected in any serious degree the composure of the Germans, who hated nothing so much as fighting upon two fronts. The Germans on this day even had the hardihood to launch an attack towards Sierck, a small town lying inside French territory near the river Moselle, which apparently caught the French napping.

In these operations of the second week of September the most important was the advance east of the Saar. The river Saar is a tributary of the Moselle which flows through German territory until just above the town of Blittersdorf, where it turns south inside the French frontier, which follows it closely until just above Saarguemines. Up to this point the river is navigable and forms a difficult barrier.

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On the 9th the French began an attack on a twelve-mile front east of the river, in the direction of Saarbrücken, the centre of the coal-mining and iron industry, and made substantial progress. The progress was continued during the next three days and there can be no doubt that the advance in this sensitive area caused some alarm in Germany. An elaborate counter-attack was prepared and delivered by the enemy on the 14th, but the ground was substantially held. The French had had to deal with the usual collection of land mines and artillery fire, but their advance had been achieved without undue loss. But it was no more than the capture of the outpost zone, though the Germans began to pay increased attention to the French lines of communication. The French also recovered the ground lost in the region of Sierck and captured the outskirts of Perl, which lies within German territory, on the road to Saarburg. Operating with tanks and motorized units they pressed their advantage, captured the whole of the village, and advanced towards Saarburg, which lies on the lower Saar.

It was now that the presence of units from the Polish front was reported, but by this time it was clear that the Polish position was past redemption. As a tactical exercise of limited scope the French operations had shown promise; but as a diversion they were a complete failure, and it was scarcely to be wondered at that people in Britain were discontented and felt that they were dishonoured. But the difficulty lay further back. The Maginot defences and the West Wall were held to be impregnable as far as any operations possible to the Allied armies were concerned, i.e. they were considered to be breakable only at huge loss; and for that neither the Allied command nor the French people were prepared. The atmosphere of the moment can best be savoured from the comment made by one of the

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sanest English critics, who, however, was most notable for the accuracy with which he reflected the dominant mood. 'Scrutator' wrote in *The Sunday Times*, about this time:

'Victory in war consists not in inflicting loss on the enemy, or even in the ratio of losses inflicted and received, but in convincing the enemy that he cannot possibly win. Already the Germans are half convinced that they cannot win a long war. If they were not, they would not be so obviously anxious to shirk a military issue in the West. If, therefore, we continue for any considerable time without serious check, we are already half-way to victory. To try to force the issue is to encourage the enemy. On the other hand, if we keep up steady pressure and occasionally bring off a surprise, we play on the enemy's fears to bring about his defeat. He sees the vista of the war gradually lengthen, the chances of our making serious mistakes slowly disappear, and his own risks increase as the war lengthens.' It is astonishing how prevalent was that mood while Germany was acting on the offensive. It is true that it would have been hazardous for France to have taken the offensive against a vastly superior enemy; but while he had some seventy divisions engaged in Poland was the only time when risk could and should have been taken. When the Polish campaign was over it was too late.

Yet the activity continued for some time along this front. In the third week of September the French local advances east of the Saar, towards Saarbrücken and Zweibrücken, had been pushed so far that the artillery was brought forward to within good range of the fortifications of the West Wall. The field works in advance of the Wall were being continually pounded by the French heavy artillery. On the 29th of the month a battalion made a considerable advance between the Moselle and the Saar and climbed the small

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plateau which looks down on the Saar. The move effected a surprise and many prisoners were captured. The fighting welled across the whole of this front; but in the beginning of October it is noticeable that the extent of German territory captured had fallen from 350 square miles to 150; and M. Charles Morice made better play with it by reducing it to acres. With the exception of the Warndt Forest, which formed a salient in French territory the advance had nowhere succeeded in retaining its original success. The capture of the bulk of the forest represented an advance of about eight or nine miles; apart from this the greatest depth of penetration was in the triangle between the Saar and the Moselle, on the small plateau that looks down on the Saar and opens a window on the German positions confronting the French farther to the east up to, in fact, the town of Saarbrücken.

At the beginning of October they were, then, in possession of the watershed along the whole frontier and inside the German territory. But already the French had come to the conclusion that it was necessary to look ahead and decide about the development of operations on this front; and at a meeting on September the 29th between M. Daladier, the Premier, and the leaders of the fighting services, General Gamelin described the position as he saw it and indicated the lines upon which he intended to proceed. There is no reason to think that his suggestions met with any sort of opposition; yet, though it was impossible to recognize the fact at the moment, the decision then come to was fatal and final. It was decided to withdraw the divisions which had carried out the advance and leave merely a line of outposts to keep contact with the enemy. This duty was allotted to some cavalry units with infantry support.

The French advance had been regarded as an affront by

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the German Staff and when they were free from preoccupation with the campaign in Poland they determined to recover the ground lost. Although it was not considerable it was of some tactical importance. Indeed the Germans appeared to realize that better than the Allies, since they had gone to the trouble of evacuating the civil population as a precaution.

The first warning the French received of any unusual activity was the increase of patrol actions over the whole frontier. On October the 14th the patrols were most active and they must have informed the German Staff that the front was only lightly held, for the divisions used in the earlier advance had been withdrawn by the 3rd of the month. Then on the 16th came the German attack. It was directed with great skill, as was to be expected. On the preceding evening the headlights of lorries moving forward between the Moselle and the east of Hornbach could be seen from the outpost zone and the news was telegraphed back, with the result that the French artillery became active. Then later there was heard the rumble of heavy vehicles, and the flash of torches could be detected as the officers directed their units into the correct positions. It was noticeable that the German artillery remained ominously silent, in spite of the roar of the French guns as they laid down a barrage across the main roads and crossings.

In the morning this mountain in labour seemed to bring forth merely a mouse. The German attack covered a stretch of only four miles east of the Moselle. The outposts had all been moved back and the attack covered by heavy artillery fire drove across the French frontier and through the small French town of Apach. This blow, then, was largely spent in the air and the advance was made against skilful machine gun and artillery fire. The Schneeberg height was, how-



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ever, captured, and though an immediate counter-attack drove the Germans out of Apach they gained their objective, which was to secure observation towards the east and to cover an advance in that sector. For on a front of eighteen miles a much heavier attack was launched in the late afternoon, east of the Saar, where the ground is less wooded and broken than on any sector of the front between the Moselle and the Rhine. In this action the Germans used about twenty thousand men; but this blow also spent itself in the air and it was noticeable that in neither action were tanks used. Once more the French tactics proved a means of husbanding their strength and inflicting heavy loss on the enemy, who were caught by the French artillery and had also to advance against the machine-gun fire of the rear-guards. Nevertheless, at the end of the action the Germans could claim that they had regained most of the lost territory. In point of fact, when the heavy rains had ceased on Sunday the 23rd, with the exception of one or two observation posts on the German side of the Forest of Warndt, the French positions were almost entirely on French territory again.

This, of course, by itself was no great matter. It is true that the French had abandoned all the ground they had gained at some cost, but ground in the final analysis means little, as a rule. But something else had been abandoned with the lost ground, though it is difficult to think it was intended or even realized at the time. The positions commanding the territory over which any advance must take place had been abandoned; and that was of importance, since the fact signified the abandonment of the idea of an offensive. There is a mind in events whatever the causes that produce them. This event now took charge of the French strategy and the French outlook. It dominated every future

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development, so that the initiative was left to the Germans, even for the most part in the raiding activity; and the French came to regard their role as purely defensive. It was almost inevitable; but it was fatal. The conviction spread and drew increasing strength that the Germans would never attack the Maginot Line, since it was to all intents and purposes impregnable. Men were demobilized and sent back to their homes; and France settled down to allow the war to take its course.

In the long and bitter winter the French came to think that they had only to sit tight behind their fortress wall, putting up with the hardships as best they could; and somehow the war would be won. That this is no mere speculation is shown by the statement of *The Times* correspondent with the French forces. When he asked the general who commanded the Maginot group of armies why he had abandoned the dominating hill crests and fallen back to the French frontier the soldier replied, 'Because we were too far in front of the Maginot Line.' Such an answer would have seemed crazy to the French generals in 1918; and it will seem incredible to French generals in the future, when France has recovered from the malaise that overwhelmed her. The same correspondent also notes another amazing mistake of French policy which had the same tendency of fostering the idea that there was no necessity to fight. The public were led to believe that 'the Maginot Line extended from the Channel to the Mediterranean'; and here it was the French censorship that was at fault. 'It was forbidden to state that the defences along the Belgian frontier consisted of little more than thin field fortifications, which were at their weakest in the Meuse valley.' The northern plain did not lend itself to the construction of the immense underground fortresses of the Maginot Line.

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So, quiet settled down on the Western Front; and the pleasant-faced Gamelin went about with his usual taciturnity, which no-one seemed to think might be caused by mental sterility.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Reactions and Excursions*

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THE Allies had been at war but a few months before there began to appear the characteristic cleavages which mark a developed democracy. More obvious in England, they were apparent in France and other democracies. Liberty tends to differentiation and there is no sensible person who would wish to quarrel with the result. It is true that some people bitterly resent as sheer perversity the mere fact that others differ from them; but this is most marked among the class which includes and delights to be known as 'the intellectuals'. It makes the largest claim on the tolerance of others, and, perhaps for that very reason, is the most intolerant. It is a matter of some speculative interest how in such circumstances it contrives to hang together at any time; but here one of the most brilliant of them all, who by some strange freak preserves her sanity—Miss Rebecca West—furnishes a clue. When she found a friend behaving with her natural illogic she scornfully exclaimed:

'But why are we to be exhausted when the unimaginative and ill-educated politicians are not? The only possible reason I can imagine is that they are better stuff than we are. Bad as the codfish on the fishmonger's slab is, it has, apparently, something we have not got. We are just a bunch of funnies, without any fixed principles or real loyalty

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to the workers, drawn together by a common determination to enjoy at any cost that *deep peace which comes of being in opposition*.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Shaw had, some time before, written an attack upon the Labour Party for its determination to be in opposition at all costs; but unhappily none paid any attention to him because he appears to live by that very practice. But in the matter of the governance of the country it might be expected that some discrimination should be shown and an attempt be made to limit criticism to the constructive. At the beginning of the war, however, the Labour and Liberal parties showed their worst colours to the world. They had been the most vocal in claiming that the Prime Minister had betrayed Czecho-Slovakia at Munich. They had been as war-like as their rich vocabulary permitted. The Government was urged repeatedly to stand up to the dictators, with the promise that Germany could be crushed like an 'egg-shell', and yet as soon as Mr. Chamberlain came up to the mark they began to fill the air with their demand to know why we were at war. It is, of course, an old stage trick of parliamentary critics to insist that one has not answered until he has provided the exact answer we want. Then, of course, it is quite in order to begin again from another angle.

This *volte-face* was not limited to democrats in England. In France a strong and ruthless enemy within rifle shot across the frontier administered a cold douche of realism to such expansiveness. But it was evident and widely popular in America. Senator Pittman, for instance, denounced the 'appeasement' policy, at the time of Munich, as contrary to Christianity, but at the time of Mr. Sumner Welles's mission he said it would be 'madness' if the nations did not make peace before serious fighting started.

<sup>1</sup> *Time and Tide*, 2 December 1939 (my italics).

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In Britain, however, the Left Wing intelligentsia seemed determined to show how slight is their claim to any light or leading. It was some time in November that *Time and Tide* began to publish a series of letters from various writers which might have been written to justify every claim of Hitler that democracy is utterly decadent. Mrs. Mitchison set the ball rolling by taking to task the editor of the paper for appearing to sympathize with a war which was apparently meaningless to the writer. She received a polite reply in an editorial note; but she was shortly assailed by all the armament of Miss Rebecca West and Mme Odette Keun. Mrs. Mitchison, fighting from the beginning on the retreat and under a white flag, soon contrived to involve herself in every sort of absurdity. Quite early in the correspondence she actually wrote: 'It appears to me essential to take any opportunities of ending this war which may arise and are likely to in the near future; we should try and have a conference with Germany.' Anyone who remembers the storm of fury from the Left when Mr. Chamberlain had had such a conference for such a purpose must have gasped. It was mainly the Left intelligentsia who found the bitterest words to say about Munich. The people at large fastened upon the salient point that there was some show of justice in the German case presented and accepted at Munich; and at any rate the Prime Minister had kept the country out of war when neither they nor the French (who, after all, had a treaty with Czecho-Slovakia) were prepared mentally or materially for it. The invasion of the pure Czech districts, which came some months after, was quite a different matter. But it was 'Munich' that drove Labour and the Liberals crazy; and it is still 'Munich' that inflames them against Mr. Chamberlain. Yet here was Mrs Mitchison suggesting another 'Munich' after the Prime Minister had ac-

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cepted the suggestion of the Left when a real *casus belli* offered itself. The very word 'appeasement' had become a term of contempt, yet Mrs. Mitchison went on to say that though a conference might break down 'we should have done our best, and we would be profoundly guilty if we omitted to try even a one-in-twenty chance'.<sup>1</sup>

Such words as these were the very idiom of Mr. Chamberlain; but they had been used when it was still possible to imagine that Hitler was only attempting to remove grievances which he might in justice resent. They were an offence or a bitter jest coming when every effort to find a *modus vivendi*, with some colour of reason and honour, had failed, had in fact been used in order to secure pawns in a game that had been long planned with complete unscrupulousness.

A host of camp followers naturally joined in the fray; but one writer who can hardly be described in that way actually defended Mrs. Mitchison's point of view and went so far as to suggest that any other attitude would be the '*trabison des clercs*'. This is a large and ambitious claim. The writer has transferred to writers of to-day the knowledge that the *clerc* possessed in days gone by. The opinion of Mme Odette Keun on this claim was expressed succinctly: 'It is singularly perplexing to read in the *New Statesman and Nation* the asininities of Mr. G. B. Shaw, in the *Fortnightly* the insanities of Mr. H. G. Wells, and in *Time and Tide* the droolings of Mrs. Naomi Mitchison'; and the editor of *The Nineteenth Century* denied the claim of these writers to any knowledge of foreign affairs. It has become the fashion in Britain to assume that anyone who has the art to write a novel can therefore be trusted to give a sound opinion on any subject under the sun. Mr. Arnold Bennett was twice

<sup>1</sup> *Time and Tide*, 25 November 1939.

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asked his opinion on survival after death and, if I can trust my recollection, he gave two different opinions

The worst point of this attitude is that it induces in the writer the unfortunate conviction that his opinion is valuable on almost any subject. With the sole exception of mathematical physics, this conviction is widely held. For the most part it does little harm, since educated readers can easily discount the absurdities of the ignorant even when they are expressed in admirable language and with considerable point. But when it is a question of fundamental importance, the least one may demand of the intellectual is the determination to keep silent when he can add nothing to the discussion. That, however, is the one thing the writer of to-day is completely incapable of doing. At first, under the ridiculous impression that the war would win itself for democracy, British listeners were regaled with long disquisitions upon the sort of future world we should aim at building, and the well-known writer who thus talked at large seemed to have no idea of the absurdity and danger of the position. Everyone has at some time of his life tried his hand at Utopia building, and the vast majority of mankind share the profound conviction that it is the easiest conceivable pastime to build a better world than the actual world in which we live and move. But the danger of indulging in this pastime, in the beginning of a war for which the democracies were certainly unprepared, was that it distracted attention from the imperative need for attempting to make up for lost time.

Fortunately, after a short time this drug was tabooed. But the more popular one of criticizing everything the Government did or omitted to do persisted to such an extent that although Labour was at one with the vast majority of the people of all shades of opinion, so that Mr. Green-



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wood won a new popularity by voicing this attitude, Labour in effect remained aloof. It would not enter a Cabinet presided over by Mr. Chamberlain; and, remaining outside, it certainly put a brake upon the national effort to bring British armament up to the required strength. Even when it took office under Mr. Churchill and found itself deprived of its habitual chance of criticizing the Government, it filled the gap by running a vendetta against Mr. Chamberlain and his chief lieutenants Mr Chamberlain has not a sympathetic personality Mr Butler, who faithfully voiced the Government's foreign policy, as Under Secretary of the Foreign Office, hardly ever roused a hundredth of the opposition which the simplest statement almost invariably encountered when Mr. Chamberlain expressed it. His great fault was that he refused to support the illusion that the League of Nations was a dependable shield when it had long ceased to be anything of the sort. He was criticized for his attempt to make terms with Italy; but most of all he was associated with 'Munich'.

This vendetta was still in full blast when France had fallen out of the war, when many of the more incredible debouches from the Left and Right had ceased. Miss Rebecca West demolished the Left guerillas by a logic which was as devastating as it was sincere Repeating Mrs. Mitchison's words:

'If we all line up as a blind unity flock we may find ourselves in an even worse situation than we are in now,' she commented, 'I submit that this sentence is a perfect expression of the state of mind which conceives itself as *perpetually in opposition*, which has no intention of carrying its faith to its logical conclusion and assuming power in order to impose it on society. If we are always to be in a minority in a stable capitalist State, then it is sensible to break up into

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scattered guerilla troops and harry the regular forces of the enemy. But I had believed that we intended to establish ourselves as a majority. I had believed that we hoped for some more drastic action than that. I had believed that we were pledged to take the first possible opportunity to establish a Socialist State based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.<sup>1</sup>

Surely that stated the position that all responsible political thinkers must adopt. But it was by no means popular with Labour before or after the war began; and still less was it popular with those who profess and call themselves 'intellectuals.' Will it be believed that Miss Helen Simpson dashed like 'the Sluggish Knight', in *Ivanhoe*, into the fray and delivered this slashing stroke: 'I agree with Mrs. Mitchison that the writer's job in wartime is to keep out of the mess and try to think internationally'<sup>2</sup> 'Internationally' is good because it is one of these delightful words that leave the obscurity several shades worse. The quotation is, however, useful since, if it does nothing else, it shows to what straits the Left intelligentsia were driven. The total effect of this sort of discussion and the attitude it implied was as grave as can be imagined. The Government of the day was directed by Mr Chamberlain, who had to bear the brunt of the negativist attitude of the Opposition, and, since it was intelligible only as opposition at all costs, as paying lip-service to the country's determination to see the war through to victory while refusing that active support without which organized labour would not mobilize itself completely for the business of providing the armaments necessary for victory, it was inevitable that the requisite mobilization never came until Britain was on the verge of inva-

<sup>1</sup> *Time and Tide*, 16 December 1939 (my italics).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 13 January 1940 (my italics)

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sion. There is, of course, a grave cause for complaint against Mr. Baldwin's and Mr. Chamberlain's administration not merely for failing to arm their country in face of a realized danger, but for Ministerial statements which have no meaning if they do not suggest that all had been done. It is true that Ministers of all political complexions in democratic countries are largely controlled by their atmosphere, and the Britain which produced the Peace Ballot was not a country which would have swallowed re-armament except in infinitesimal doses. Responsible Ministers cannot take a strong line internationally under such conditions.

It may be contended that the leader of the Government should lead; and that is one of the profound truths which the war crisis may have stamped indelibly on everyone's consciousness. But the avalanche of criticism which follows every smallest initiative on the part of any administration makes leadership unpopular, and, until Mr. Churchill took command, there had not been a post-war Premier who had not seen it wise to lead enthusiastically from the rear. If there is to be a heresy-hunt after 'guilty men', the net should include many of the hunters who opposed what they now wish to assassinate some Ministers for omitting to do. It may be urged that Mr Chamberlain, realizing that Labour would not and yet should co-operate in the Government, ought to have resigned and left it to another to accomplish the unity he was incapable of achieving himself. But opponents who took such liberties with their own responsibilities should not in common decency exact angelic standards of Mr. Chamberlain. The diagnosis of the position is infinitely easier in this *post mortem* than it was while it was a living fact. When Mr Chamberlain saw that there was no hope of persuading the Opposition to take their place in the Government and fully realized that their refusal

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was due to their personal objection to him, in spite of the bitterness of the conclusion, he handed his resignation to the King with a simplicity that redeemed many faults.

If I have paid so much attention to the aberrations of the Left intelligentsia it is because they were ever ready to admit themselves 'intellectuals' and the mere citing of the phrase *trahison des clercs* implies the recognition of real responsibility. But the more compelling reason is that it was precisely they who filled the air with their scorn and fury about 'the betrayal of Munich' and the necessity of standing up to the dictators. Those who had found a thousand war aims before the battle was joined were the very last to insist that they did not know what the war was about. It was very different with another body of minority opinion. The walls of London soon began to bear legends introduced by a stroke of lightning. 'Stop this Jews' War'; or 'Trust Mosley and get peace'. There were numerous variants of these inspiring appeals, and their distribution was not uniform. But they represented the Fascist counter-attack; and, as far as I can judge, they represented an insignificant body of opinion, though it was very determined. Apparently the Government judged it to be of a formidable character, since in June 1940 they arrested numbers of prominent Fascists. Only its underground character seems to me to give any suggestion of the formidable, and this is one of the most ambiguous arguments of which I know. Moreover, these people were arrested presumably for constructive treachery, and experience in the Foreign Office has convinced me that though treachery is amazingly common among other nations it is far from common in Britain. A little later the walls which bore these Fascist inscriptions were bearing the legend 'Hang Mosley'.

The *Daily Worker* represented another of the strange re-

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actions of the war. At first it was pro-war, but when the eminent pacifists of the Kremlin frowned upon this attitude they began their opposition. It is impossible to guess what strength this movement had. It is quite certain that the origin of the Fascist movement was subsequent to the rise of the Communist; and it is one of the more inexplicable things of British public life that such tolerance was shown to the latter when the former was subjected to every sort of repression. At worst it seems to have added a little burlesque or baroque to the rather drab surface of political life, and the weedy youths in black shirts who sold their paper in the streets can hardly have produced a tremor in the heart of the most timid. It is undoubted that they included some very influential people, and that was possibly the reason for the detention of so many of its personnel. The Fifth Column had played so considerable a part in the campaign in other countries that it seemed advisable to take action against all who might play a similar role here. But one thing can be said in favour of the Fascists. *they had never pretended to favour the war.* They left no ambiguity about their attitude, though apparently they did not like the form of government accepted here; and people who maintain that they are patriots on that proviso are not patriots at all.

As the war continued, pacifism gradually diminished. At the beginning of June Mr. Bertrand Russell stated that he had found salvation. Dr. Maud Royden followed, and even the League of Nations Union, which had had so powerful an influence upon several governments, also changed its position. These are perhaps natural reactions, though the thinker whose pacifism is so robust that it can persist until the enemy of everything it holds dear is at its gates is by that very fact outside the ordinary rules of the rational or

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natural. For the plain fact is that when the enemy is at the gates it is already some years late to begin to arm. The most rudimentary acquaintance with military history makes it quite clear that the constant efforts of soldiers have been directed to securing a quicker and fuller mobilization than their enemy. The advantages are so obvious that it is even unnecessary to read military history at all

Behind all these aberrations of small groups the bulk of the people carried on their quiet lives content to make almost every sacrifice to carry through the war to a successful conclusion. Those who had much to sacrifice offered it readily. Labour, of course, as is usual and desirable, came off a little better than in time of peace. But whether the stake in the country was large or small, the vast majority prepared to do its best for the common cause. When Labour took office under a new Premier the whole country was harnessed to the common cause. Of panic there was none, though the B.B C gave descriptions of the horrors of invasion and bombardment in other countries that might have been expected to produce some beginnings of fear. The British, as a great Englishman once said, 'are very difficult to impress or depress'. When the enemy was installed across the Channel there was still no fear. Many people had had the opportunity of seeing and talking to soldiers who had been evacuated from Dunkirk, and after that tonic it was impossible to fear.

## CHAPTER 7

### *The Battle of the River Plate*

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**I**t was while the war was in the doldrums that an incident occurred which had an almost magical effect in reviving the spirits of the Allies.

'In this sombre dark winter . . . the brilliant action of the Plate . . . came like a flash of light and colour on the scene, carrying with it encouragement to all who are fighting—to ourselves and to our Allies,' said Mr. Churchill with his remarkable facility for summing up a situation.

It was because the incident was so full a contrast to the prevailing conception of the war as a 'stalemate' and the Allied part in it as merely the patient recipients of German action, that it broke so startlingly on the consciousness; and, differing so entirely from the preceding pattern, it occurred appropriately at the other end of the world. It was on December the 13th that the world heard of a British naval victory off South America; and when the details became known it was realized that there was nothing to mar its completeness. A 'pocket battleship' had been beaten in a running fight and having put in to a neutral port for respite had refused to renew the battle.

The 'pocket battleship' was a type evolved in conformity with the provisions of the Versailles Treaty to be the main naval element in the German attempt to defeat the Allied

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blockade. It had been realized by German naval students that the submarine was not a complete answer, in view of the expedient of arranging ships in convoy, and that the attempt to defeat the Allied navies by surface vessels, impossible under the limitations of the Versailles Treaty, was impracticable in any case. A means was sought which would offer to deal massive blows at the Allied trade and, in conjunction with the submarine and the small compact High Seas Fleet, might break the Allied blockade and impose an effective counter-blockade. This solution was what came to be known as the 'pocket battleship'; and when war broke out there were three of them in existence—the *Deutschland*, the *Admiral von Scheer* and the *Graf Spee*. Their role was to attack not merely single vessels but even vessels in convoy.

These battleships had many novel features. They were of 10,000 tons displacement, carried as their main armament six 11-inch guns, and had a speed of 26 knots. They had, therefore, an armament too heavy for the naval vessels with competing speeds and too high a speed for the capital ships with competing armament. They were in theory a very formidable type. They had a secondary armament of eight 5.9-inch guns and a protective armour sufficient to defy most of the high-speed cruisers. In fact it seemed that only the Allied battle-cruisers could meet them on terms of superiority, and Britain only possessed three of these, the *Hood*, *Renown* and *Repulse*. Each of these could give the pocket battleship several knots of speed; and they carried 15-inch guns. But, of course, they were so valuable that they had to be reserved for major tasks and so few that their radius of action was strictly limited. It was on these conditions the German Admiralty counted. The German policy was not to risk anything that could be avoided and it



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was noted with derision that in the first encounter between an armed British ship and a pocket battleship, on the 26th November 1939, the *Deutschland*, *ex abundantia cautela*, gave battle with the assistance of another cruiser.

When the converted liner *Rawalpindi* encountered the *Deutschland* with another cruiser on the northern flank of the British blockading area she at once gave battle and fought very skilfully and gallantly at impossible odds. The *Rawalpindi* was part of the Tenth Cruiser Squadron, which was engaged in the actual work of the blockade because these great vessels were better able to keep the seas in all weathers; but it had only such improvised armament as its reinforced decks would support. It was, in fine, merely an auxiliary cruiser and, in effect, no match for any sort of warship except a submarine.

This encounter therefore gave no information as to the qualities of the pocket battleship except, irrationally, to reinforce the conviction that it was practically invulnerable, unless battle cruisers could be devoted to it. When the S.S. *Clement* was sunk on the last day of September, it was known that a pocket battleship was at large in the South Atlantic. But from that time, for some months, news continued to arrive of further sinkings, ranging from the west to the east coast of Africa; and there were reports that it was the *Deutschland* and the *Admiral von Scheer*. It was on the afternoon of the 3rd December 1939, that news came of the presence of a pocket battleship attacking the British S.S. *Doric Star* off the west coast of Africa. The seas had been systematically searched for German raiders, and commerce suffered incomparably less than during the Great War. Now, it seemed to Commodore H. H. Harwood, commanding the South America Division, that definite and valuable news had come and there might be a fair chance of

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bringing the raider to battle. Bearing in mind what has been said of the power of these battleships, such a decision, if it had been known, would have been regarded as the outlook of a gambler, for the South America Division at this moment consisted of three light cruisers whose total broadside was only two-thirds the weight of a pocket battleship's. Moreover, the smaller guns of two of the cruisers could not penetrate the pocket battleship's armour except at close range; and the latter ships could, at long range, blow the British cruisers out of the water. All they had to offset such advantages were about six knots of superior speed and a greater ability to manœuvre.

The South America Division consisted normally of four cruisers: the *Cumberland*, the largest and most powerful, was of 10,000 tons displacement carrying 8-inch guns; the *Exeter*, a cruiser of 8,400 tons with six 8-inch guns; the *Ajax*, a 7,000-ton cruiser with eight 6-inch guns, and the *Achilles* with the same tonnage and armament as the *Ajax*. The *Achilles* belonged to the New Zealand force; and its crew consisted mainly of men from that Dominion; But, on December the 3rd, the *Cumberland* was refitting in the Falkland Islands; and the other three cruisers, in their normal work of policing the area, were distributed over 2,000 miles. Yet Commodore Harwood, flying his broad pennant in H.M.S. *Ajax*, began to plan an action between his small squadron and the pocket battleship, then at the other side of the Atlantic. He reasoned that, knowing news of her position had been given to the world, she would get as far away from that area as possible and that in all probability she would make for South America. He could not possibly cover the whole of the immense distance probably involved; but the most important area was about the River Plate, where he calculated the pocket battleship would

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arrive on the evening of December the 12th or the following morning. He therefore gave instructions for the squadron to concentrate, fuelled, off the River Plate estuary early on December 12th. This was done in one short signal after which no wireless messages were sent, in order to give no information to the enemy.

The ships assembled at the appointed time, and Commodore Harwood explained his plan and exercised them in the tactics he proposed to use. In the official report it is stated that his last words were to 'maintain decisive gun range' without further orders. He had quite rightly decided that in this expedient lay his one chance of victory; and the rest of his tactics were devoted to minimizing the risks of such action.

At 6.14 in the morning of December the 13th smoke was observed on the horizon. It was a fine clear morning. The *Exeter*, ordered to investigate, reported 'I think it is a pocket battleship.' At this point it is impossible to withhold one's admiration for the exact fulfilment of the ten days' series of estimates and calculations. Here was the pocket battleship brought to battle. It only remained to see what the British commander would make of his opportunity.

The British ships were steaming east of the enemy when he was sighted; and their courses were set to converge. All ships began to work up to full speed and carry out the tactics practised the day before. The *Ajax* and *Achilles* steered north-east and the *Exeter* west, in order to engage the battleship from different angles and so compel him either to divide his fire between the ships or leave one unthreatened by his heavy guns. Four minutes after sighting the smoke of the battleship she was seen to have 'split' her heavy armament, one turret being directed against the *Exeter* and the other against *Ajax* and *Achilles*; and it is worthy

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of note that *the whole of the main action only occupied an hour and twenty-two minutes*. At 6 20 the *Exeter* opened fire with four 8-inch guns at a range of nearly ten miles; and two and a half minutes later the after guns joined in. This 8-inch gun fire seemed to worry the enemy from the first and she turned the whole of her main armament against the *Exeter*. In a few moments the cruiser's communications had been damaged, a turret with its two guns was put out of action and all the personnel on the bridge, except the captain and two others, were killed or wounded. Moreover, the wheelhouse communications were wrecked and the ship for the moment was out of control.

While this was taking place the *Ajax* and *Achilles* were profiting by the concentration of interest elsewhere to get nearer and make the best use of their 6-inch guns; and, so rapid and accurate was their fire that in ten minutes the battleship once more split her main armament. Her secondary armament had been directed against the two British cruisers, but without effect. At 6 32 and again at 6 38 the *Exeter* fired torpedoes at the battleship; but she was now suffering more damage and when she turned another of her turrets was put out of action by an 11-inch shell and a fire was started between decks. She had now only two guns in action, the captain was reduced to the use of a small boat's compass, and internal communication in the ship was done by messengers. All this had happened in twenty minutes; yet the *Exeter* at this point changed course *towards the enemy* so that she might engage the battleship with her two remaining guns. She was down by the bow and had a slight list; but was still steaming at full speed.

About this time an 11-inch shell burst near the *Achilles* and momentarily put the main control position out of action, yet not for a moment was there any lack of control. A boy,

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ignoring the destruction about him, continued with the utmost coolness passing information to the guns. But the *Graf Spee* was in worse plight. Under cover of a smoke screen she turned away to the westward with the two small cruisers in pursuit and the *Exeter* still firing the only two guns which were available. A quarter of an hour later the *Ajax* and *Achilles* changed their course in order to bring all their guns to bear again, and the heavier fire at once affected the *Graf Spee*, which turned away, laying a smoke screen, to avoid the British fire.

It was now 7 o'clock, forty-two minutes from the beginning of the battle; and from this time on the *Graf Spee* made frequent use of smoke and changed her course in order to escape further punishment. But Commodore Harwood, in a few minutes, turned towards the *Graf Spee* to shorten the range even at the sacrifice of being unable to use his after guns against the battleship. The British cruisers were now steaming at full speed. Once more the *Graf Spee* made a turn and seemed to be steering directly at the *Exeter*; but in a few minutes, under the effect of the fire from the *Ajax* and *Achilles*, she turned again to bring all her heavy guns to bear upon the two cruisers. It was as if a mastiff was so worried by a number of terriers that it knew not what to do; first it would attack one, only to find the others on its back. The *Ajax* somehow had contrived to escape the heavy shells, though the range was now short; for though the *Graf Spee* was also firing her secondary armament her firing had now grown ragged and inaccurate.

Commodore Harwood, thinking that the battleship was sufficiently set on her course for him to attack with his torpedoes, turned to get into position; but the *Graf Spee* made a great change of course to avoid them and then turning once more struck the *Ajax*, putting one of her turrets out

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of action and jamming another. The *Exeter*, though still continuing to fire, had been forced to reduce her speed. At about 7.30, however, the last gun turret was put out of action by flooding and the ship could no longer take part in the fight. A few minutes later she turned away to the south-east, steaming slowly and beginning to repair herself. The battle had lasted by this time an hour and twenty-two minutes. It does not seem long; but all the ships concerned had suffered damage and heavy casualties.

Meanwhile the *Ajax*, with only three guns in action, after turning away in response to the warning of her aircraft, to avoid torpedoes, had resumed the attack and had caused the *Graf Spee* to turn and zigzag under smoke screens. A little before the *Exeter* had retired from the battle the *Ajax* and *Achilles* had reduced the range to four miles; and the *Graf Spee* had turned in order to hit back with all her guns. It was at this point, when the cruisers' firing was so accurate and damaging, that Commodore Harwood was informed that there was some danger of running short of ammunition if the battle was to be prolonged. The British Commander at once came to the decision to break off the action and shadow the *Graf Spee* until night-fall, when he would have a better chance of closing to a range at which his lighter armament and torpedoes would have decisive effect. He was influenced in making this decision by the fact that the *Exeter* was of no further use to him; and so, as the *Exeter* steamed slowly away to the south-east, the *Ajax* and *Achilles* turned eastward under cover of a smoke screen. While the ships were beginning to turn an 11-inch shell from the *Graf Spee* smashed the main topmast and wireless aerials of the *Ajax*. Spare aerials were soon set up as Commodore Harwood watched the *Graf Spee* steaming westward. In a short time the British

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ships also turned west to begin their work of shadowing the enemy.

It was only 8 o'clock in the morning. The battle had lasted less than two hours and yet the *Exeter* had been put out of action, the *Graf Spee* had received enough punishment to persuade its commander to secure a respite to patch up his wounds, and if the smaller British cruisers had suffered no worse it was due to their speed and the skill with which they were handled. Commodore Harwood had, however, to provide for the immediate future. He saw that he could not risk further day action with the *Exeter hors de combat* and his own ammunition running low, so he decided to order the *Cumberland* to join him from the Falklands, where she had been refitting. The *Cumberland*, however, was already on her way north. Signals had been picked up indicating that an action was being fought; and the commanding officer immediately left the Falklands. When Commodore Harwood's orders were received she worked up to full speed. The Admiralty ordered the *Ark Royal* and the battle-cruiser *Renown* and other ships which had been operating some 3,000 miles away to proceed towards South America, and fuel was also accumulated in readiness for any emergency.

For the next eleven hours the two cruisers followed the *Graf Spee*, until it was evident that she intended to enter the River Plate. On two occasions she had fired on the cruisers. Shortly after 10 o'clock the *Achilles* had come to a range of  $11\frac{1}{2}$  miles and the battleship fired twice with her three forward guns, a fact which suggested that the other guns were out of action. The *Achilles* narrowly escaped, and turned away at full speed under a smoke screen. About 7.15 in the evening she opened fire on the *Ajax*; and the cruiser turned out of range under a smoke screen. At about

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9 o'clock the *Achilles*, shadowing the *Graf Spee* from the north of English Bank, which runs across the Plate estuary, shortened the range, and the battleship changing its course under a smoke screen, opened fire. The *Achilles* at once replied and then herself turned away, but changed her course westward again when the *Graf Spee* ceased to fire. Three times during the next three-quarters of an hour the *Graf Spee* fired salvoes in an attempt to shake off her shadower. But a few minutes after 10 o'clock it was evident that the battleship was passing north of English Bank and a little before 11 o'clock it was clear that she intended to enter Montevideo harbour. This she did a few minutes after midnight.

Commodore Harwood then made dispositions to prevent the *Graf Spee* escaping unobserved and his own cruisers being caught in a disadvantageous position with regard to the light; and then began his long watch. The next night the *Cumberland* arrived, a very welcome reinforcement. The ships were refuelled and the watch went on with sustained vigilance. But the men on the spot could not have suffered from the impatience which so much irritated people in Britain. According to international law the *Graf Spee* was only entitled to remain twenty-four hours in a neutral port; but the Uruguayan authorities granted her an extension in order to make herself seaworthy. No-one could be certain that she would not attempt to escape at any moment under cover of night or mist. So the days dragged on, with report and counter-report rousing and then dashing the expectation of the world and placing an increasing strain upon watchers on the spot.

At length, on Sunday afternoon, the British commander was informed that the *Graf Spee* was preparing for sea; and the crews brightened up at once. About 5.30 the cruisers



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prepared for action as news came that the battleship was weighing anchor. Three-quarters of an hour later she left harbour with her supply ship, *Tacoma*, observed by the *Ajax*'s aircraft, turned westward and, in a position about six miles south-west of Montevideo, in shallow water, she blew herself up. Such was the inglorious end of a vessel which was once the pride of the German Navy, had represented her country at the Coronation review at Spithead, and had carried Hitler in triumph to Memel. This was the most notorious of the scuttlings of German ships and the practice was adopted with slavish imitation by Italy. But the German commander deserved better of his country; and, after seeing to the disposal of his crew, he shot himself.

Commodore Harwood, in his period of waiting for the *Graf Spee* to resume the battle, was informed that he had been knighted and created Rear-Admiral, and the three captains all received rewards. These not only represented the feeling of the ordinary people, but also reflected the judgement of the Admiralty on a very gallant fight. The *Exeter* had gone to the Falklands to refit and on her return to England later on she received a great welcome. When the *Achilles* returned to New Zealand the people very rightly received her as a victor. The great fact which this battle demonstrated was the supremacy of mind and will over the machine. The success of the three small cruisers could not, for that reason, be taken to depreciate the value of the type. If Commodore Harwood had been in charge of the *Graf Spee*, the result might have been entirely different. As it was, when the details of the action became known, it was recognized as a characteristic expression of the Navy, in its way a perfect piece of prevision, planning and spirited fighting; and at the time when the whole of the Allied

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effort appeared to be restricted to sitting down behind massively fortified positions this restored some sanity and hope to the outlook. For no-one in his heart could believe that inaction represented the cream of her thought and resolve, and no-one but the muddle-headed could believe that the Germans would succumb to such strategy.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Finland's Fight for Freedom*

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**T**he war had not been in progress long before the world was confronted with some of the effects of the Russo-German pact. Britain could not agree to barter away the freedom of the Baltic States in order to safeguard freedom elsewhere; but to Hitler this was a mere matter of expediency. The Baltic States had been no bulwark in the Great War, and he saw no reason why they should give Russia any protection now. So Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were all compelled to cede to Russia powers over their territory which put their independence in so strait a jacket that in a short time it must succumb.

But the Baltic States excited little interest outside Scandinavia. It was far otherwise when Russia began to make demands on Finland. This lovely country was widely known beyond its borders. It had a flourishing community in the United States; and all who were conversant with its mode of life knew it to be facing the social problems which were creating strains everywhere with enlightened intelligence.

M Molotoff in a speech on October the 31st made public his version of the Russian Demands on Finland. He denied that they were demanding the Aaland Islands. What they wanted was a 'mutual assistance pact'. They had asked Finland to move back some kilometres in the Leningrad

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area and take part of Karelia in exchange. They had also sought to rent some islands and create naval bases in the northern part of the Gulf of Finland. He criticized the intervention of President Roosevelt as un-neutral.

Russia's demands, in fact, raised, much earlier than Hitler's action, the critical question of whether the totalitarian rulers recognized the right of small nations to their independence. For, admitting that Russia had a case in the matter of the Karelian isthmus, the Finnish case was much stronger. Finland could never think of attacking Russia, even if Leningrad was less than 20 miles from her frontier. The lamb does not attack the bear. But Russia was sufficiently powerful to devour twenty Finlands if her size, resources and armaments meant anything. The Russian claims could not reasonably be urged against Finland, and the only enemy against whom she might be expected to build a defence would as soon march across the Karelian isthmus as he would across the Caucasus. The Germans certainly do not create obstacles for themselves. Granting Russian nervousness in the Gulf of Finland, in spite of its irrationality, was Finland to remove the one strong door it possessed in order that that Russia should feel more secure?

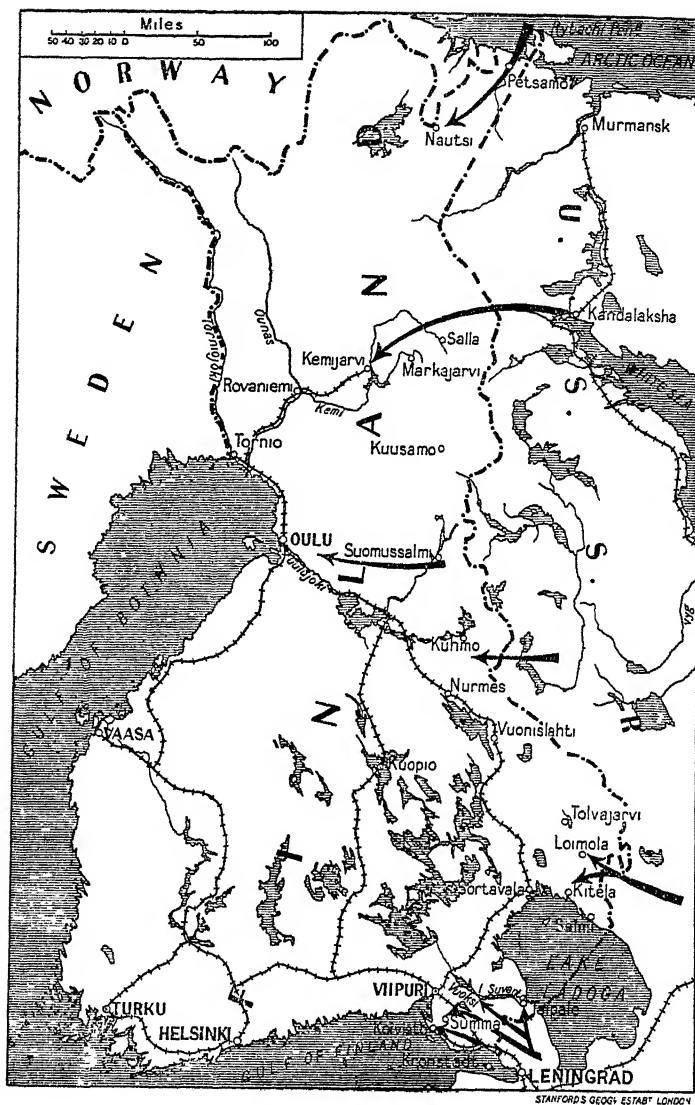
The discussions between Finland and Russia continued throughout November; but the temperature was rising. There were attacks upon Finland in the Soviet press and towards the end of the month Russia protested to Finland about her forces having fired into Soviet territory. The shots had taken place in Russia. But the Soviet would not hear the explanation and the Communist Party in Moscow began to hold demonstrations. The Finnish Government were described as the 'bandits of capitalism', etc. The procedure introduced by Germany in place of the normal declaration of war was being scrupulously followed. On November the

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28th the Soviet Government denounced the 1932 Treaty of Non-Aggression with Finland on the ground that the Finnish troop concentrations in the 'neighbourhood of Leningrad' were an act of hostility to the Soviet Union, inconsistent with the Treaty. The following day relations were broken off by Russia, and Molotoff broadcast a statement that 'the high command of the Red Army has ordered the army and navy to be in readiness for any eventuality in order to prevent possible fresh provocation by the Finnish military'. The next day Russian troops crossed the Finnish frontier at several points and began a demonstration which did much to remove the Soviet factor from the European tension. For it was not long before it became apparent to the world that the new Russian army had all the faults of the old and could only succeed by dead weight.

A new Finnish Government was formed on a broader basis. Russia also created a Finnish 'Government' with Kuusinen, a former secretary of the Comintern, as Premier; and went through the elaborate pretence of announcing that it had signed a pact of mutual assistance with the 'Peoples' Government'.

Finland is a country of less than four million inhabitants with a peace army of about 33,000 officers and men, but with a possibility of mobilizing almost ten times the number in case of war. Thinly populated, with numerous lakes, rivers and forests, the country is admirably suited to guerilla defence by soldiers inured to the climate and thoroughly acquainted with the terrain, and presents great difficulties to the advance of considerable bodies of troops. The great Arctic Road connects Petsamo, the port on the Arctic, and Rovaniemi on the railway which runs into the main line connecting Sweden and Finland. This main line has a branch at Oulu which crosses the country to Lake Ladoga,



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and continues down the west coast of Finland to supply the chief industrial and administrative centres

Russia's numbers and resources were such that the issue seemed a foregone conclusion, unnecessary and useless to challenge. Indeed the Russian Government appears to have been convinced that Finland would not and could not do more than make a show of resistance. Instead of this it found itself faced with a most skilful defensive that could not be broken until the Soviet had put forth its full strength. It entered upon the struggle with a great handicap. The Karelian isthmus is the one place against which, served by a sufficiently highly organized railway system, it should have been able to concentrate and maintain a thoroughly equipped army. Russian strategy, contemplating a movement north of Lake Ladoga to turn the defensive system in the Karelian isthmus, should have been able to break through the defensive there. But for two months it achieved no significant success either against the Karelian defences, which came to be known as the 'Mannerheim Line', or in the movement that might have turned them.

The Russian intention was to break down all resistance by an *attaque brusquée*; and its strategy was to attack over the whole front and turn the 'Mannerheim Line' either in the immediate neighbourhood or farther north at the waist of the peninsula. An attack at this point would, if successful, have cut Finland off from all external help by capturing the junction at Oulu. It would, then, have been possible to send neither arms nor volunteers; and the Russians could have swept south to the richer and most populous part of Finland. To improve the chances of this westward advance in central Finland the Russians attempted simultaneously to develop an offensive from the north.

General Mannerheim, who had once before saved Fin-

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land, took charge of the defence and fought a battle after the manner of Napoleon. When, on insisting that the big battalions always win, he was reminded that he had frequently defeated armies which outnumbered his own, he retorted that what he said was still true because in such circumstances, he instantly fell upon part of the enemy's army with all his forces and then, having routed it, he attacked the remnant. So, he maintained, his force was always superior to his enemy's. General Mannerheim was so poor in numbers that he could not hope to defeat the full force of his enemy. But he had a brave intelligent army which was fighting on and for its soil. He used his mobility to fall upon sections of the Russian Army when they were farthest from their supply lines, holding, meanwhile, its strongest concentration before his defensive system in the Karelian isthmus. This 'Line' was a deep defensive position skilfully built into the terrain and making use of every rise in the ground and every lake.

It was at Salla, north of the waist-line, that the Russians achieved their first success. But though this town was captured, it was at once retaken. On December the 19th they were once more past Salla and had penetrated to the neighbourhood of Kemijarvi. This town is the railhead, and it lies only 60 miles from Rovaniemi, which was the Finnish northern headquarters. Petsamo, the Finnish port on the Arctic, had been captured by the Russians, retaken and lost again; and the invaders were now pressing down the Arctic road towards Nautsi. General Wallenius, the Finnish Northern commander, watched his opponent coolly and then suddenly counter-attacked both towards the north and across the 'waist-line'. By skilful flank attacks he compelled the columns in both areas to retreat, taking many prisoners and capturing over 30 tanks.



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Meanwhile, in the isthmus the Finns had inflicted heavy losses on the assailants. In fact after a month's fighting the Russian casualties were put as high as 30,000 killed, and if this should merely represent the order of the casualties it is sufficiently impressive. It was estimated at this time that the Russians were using between Lake Ladoga and the Arctic about 16 divisions, or 300,000 men, as many, that is to say, as the full mobilized strength of Finland; but it was noted that the Russian prisoners and Russian dead showed no signs of the care which the Finnish Government lavished on its own troops.

Part of the difficulty experienced by the Russian command in the central and northern sectors was due to the vulnerability of its communications; Finnish patrols on skis advanced on the flanks of the advancing detachments and continually harassed the supply column. The Russians retorted by bringing up howitzers to shell the rear of the Finnish lines. But the advantage rested with the Finns, who with their greater mobility were able to keep the enemy lines in a continual state of nerves and to inflict loss out of proportion to the size of the patrols engaged.

It was in the neighbourhood of Suomussalmi that Finland secured its most striking victories. This town lies near the shore of Lake Kianta, at a point where the Russian frontier lies nearest to the junction of Oulu. This is the real 'waist-line' of Finland; and from the first the Russians made vigorous attempts to cut across the 120 miles which separated the two points. At the beginning of January three divisions of first-rate troops, very different in equipment and *morale* from those first sent against Finland, were concentrated on this area. From the opening of hostilities Suomussalmi had been the centre of fierce fighting, but on this occasion the Russians apparently meant to make an end.

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General Wallenius as usual bided his time. His patrols gave way before the advancing column until he had accumulated sufficient force to take it in front and flank. Then he fell upon it and routed it. The 163rd Division was completely defeated and the 42nd, moving up belatedly to its assistance, met with an even worse fate a few miles nearer the frontier. In the case of each other defeat the Finns had killed numbers of their opponents; but on this occasion they made their biggest capture of prisoners. But not only did they take over 1,000 prisoners, the roads over which the division retired were strewn with guns, armoured cars, tanks, motor-cars, machine-guns, automatic anti-aircraft guns and an immense quantity of material.

The victory on this front was rendered more decisive by successes farther north about Salla and Petsamo. Here also great quantities of material were captured and it seemed that, after this severe check, the Russians must call a halt to the operations until the spring.

It was at this point the agitation for sending help to Finland began to grow and develop. Italy was sending aeroplanes; and, as Russia had expressly stated that she did not consider that the operations constituted a state of war, there seemed no clear reason why the Allies should not assist a country which was 'fighting a battle for civilization'. It was not then suggested that troops should be sent, and it seems improbable there would have been any question of help if the world had not been shamed into taking notice of the struggle by the brilliant and heroic resistance of Finland. When three Russian divisions were decisively defeated many people began to be restless about the fate of Finland who had not turned a hair at the submission of the Baltic States. The first consignment of British material had already reached Finland and the outcry for the dispatch of

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further and heavier supplies grew daily. The obsession with the defensive and the mechanistic side of war persuaded many sympathizers that with a sufficient supply of material Finland could defeat a country which could mobilize about forty times as many men.

The development of the campaign was to blow that illusion sky-high. But in the meantime the struggle continued. When the Finns had defeated the three Russian divisions about Suomussalmi, the Russians were developing another attack at Salla, 120 miles to the north. These operations were too distant to be immediately affected by the fortune of the advance towards Oulu; but in the next ten days the Salla column, which had once more advanced to within artillery range of Kemijarvi, was compelled to fall back to Marksjarvi, half-way between the railhead and Salla. There the Russians, much more skilfully led than on the Lake Kianta sector, entrenched, and, the Finns sensing the growing resistance abandoned their forcing tactics.

So matters stood in the third week of January. Meanwhile a more critical movement had developed north of Lake Ladoga. It was here that the Russian command hoped to turn the isthmus defences. On January the 21st the Russians extended their pressure to the small settlements at Aittajoki and Kollaanjoki just inside the Finnish frontier, and the attack lasted for over a week. Coincident with this attack the Russians advanced in force on Taipale, where the Mannerheim Line leaves Lake Ladoga. The Finns met this fresh attack north of Ladoga with a converging movement from Loimola, on the railway from Sortavala, in the south and Ilomantsi, about 40 miles to the north. The Russians were first allowed to advance while the Finnish ski-ing detachments struck down at the main line of retreat towards the east. By skilful tactics the Finns inflicted heavy loss on

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the Russians, cutting off small parties of the unwieldy mass, who were soon short of supplies. With the greatest determination the Russians attacked continuously, night and day. On January the 24th the fighting reached a crisis, the Russians using a heavy concentration of troops and masses of artillery and tanks; but the Finnish enveloping movement was pressed steadily and on the 29th the Russians were again making an attempt to counter-attack the northern movement by a heavy thrust against Ilomantsi. Once more they suffered heavy loss.

At the end of January it was estimated that the Russians had lost about 200,000 men. But it is significant that only two-fifths of this number was attributed to the second month of the campaign. The Russians had overhauled their command after the first abortive attacks, and the new engagements, while depending almost as much on mechanized troops, showed a higher level of tactics. The poor quality of the first troops had been remarked; but the divisions which were now appearing included picked Siberian units and troops from Turkestan and the Ukraine.

During these two months of skilful and heroic fighting by the Finns, the world had been shocked by the brutal air-raids that were repeatedly made against Finnish towns. Hospitals and ambulances, so clearly marked that no-one could fail to distinguish them, churches and small towns were ruthlessly bombed. Dr. Holsti had at Geneva shown how threadbare was the Russian case against Finland, but the repeated raids on non-combatants pointed the conclusion in a way that no words could have done. Sortavala, a wooden town on the railway, on the north-western shores of Lake Ladoga, was set on fire and completely destroyed. It was subjected to repeated attacks with incendiary bombs until it was alight from end to end, and once thoroughly on

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fire, it burned for nearly a week. By the end of the first week in February it was burned out.

It was on February the 1st that the Russians began the second battle for the Mannerheim Line. On this occasion the attack was directed much more skilfully. In order that the Finns should not be able to reinforce the critical sector, the offensive was reopened over the whole front. To the immediate north of Lake Ladoga the 18th Russian division had been isolated at Kitela for several days already and reserves were thrown in on its right flank to effect a relief and to pin down the Finns. But with characteristic tenacity they clung to their prey and by the 5th the division was almost completely destroyed. Farther north at Suomussalmi and at Salla the advance was resumed once more and the Russians succeeded at least in compelling the Finns to stand their ground.

As a result the defenders of the Mannerheim Line, which was a deep defensive position, found themselves under continuous attack, and when they yielded gave way from sheer fatigue. The Russians drove their divisions to the utmost and when they were worn out replaced them with fresh troops. Life is cheap in Russia; and it was possible to maintain the attack with troops constantly renewed, almost indefinitely.

The Russian attack, however, depended on this occasion on skilful tactics as well as unlimited weight. The artillery concentrations and bombardments may have been exaggerated but it is certain that apart from the ultra-lavish shelling at Verdun, on the Somme, and east of Ypres, the amount of shell expended must have established a record. The Russians also used heavy tanks and sent their men forward behind shields. Moreover, having provided for the engagement along the whole of the eastern front, they saw

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to it that there was no chance of relieving troops in the Mannerheim Line by striking between the lake and the sea.

While attacking along the whole of the isthmus front, however, they directed their particular attention towards Summa, twenty miles south-east of Viipuri, towards the left centre of the Mannerheim Line. Here over 100 bombers were sent against the town after a bombardment lasting six hours. The defenders found themselves more heavily battered than ever before and when they manned their machine guns it was to see, emerging from dense smoke screens, armoured sledges from which machine-gun detachments leaped forward to the attack. These sledges were pushed forward by heavy tanks until they were near the line, when the tanks veered aside and swept ahead.

In spite of the versatile nature and continuity of the attack, and the skilful cover given to the Russian infantry, the Russians suffered heavy loss. Figures appear to lose their value in this campaign, since the Russians from the beginning showed a complete contempt for loss, in the certain assurance that they could well afford to lose ten or forty times to one and still win in the end. But it is clear that they very quickly secured an important tactical success on the isthmus sector on this occasion.

Whatever be one's attitude to war, it is impossible to withhold one's admiration from the heroic defenders who, having fought already for two months against a vast numerical superiority and an even greater superiority in machines—tanks, aeroplanes, and artillery—could now sustain an unceasing attack of incredible cumulative weight. There could be no comparison between Russia and Finland. When Germany attacked Poland she did so with little greater ultimate superiority than two to one and her actu-

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ally engaged numbers were distinctly less than that, though her mechanical equipment was immensely greater. But, fighting a battle which was hopeless from the beginning, Finland gave an exhibition of *morale* which has seldom been seen before. It was not a question of brute courage. The Russians had that. It was the courage of the intelligent and the educated who can measure the risks and face all for something that he holds to be of supreme worth.

At the end of a week's frenzied attack, the Russians had secured a lodgement in the outpost zone of the Mannerheim Line. But the general who had advised and now defended it did not lose his head. He made the best dispositions his resources could afford on the sector under immediate attack. As we have seen, he developed his economical and skilful offensive north of Lake Ladoga and when the positions in front of Summa had been lost he had destroyed the 18th Division. He contrived also to cut the communications of the 54th Division near Kuhmo and a Russian attack near Suomussalmi, which attempted to relieve the pressure on that division, was roughly handled, and the envelopment was still further developed.

But the Russians, having secured a success, showed that, on this occasion, they were not to be prevented enlarging it. They continued to hammer away at Summa. They continued to suffer heavy loss in men and material; but the fatigue of the Finns increased and the wedge in the line was extended. The Russians attacked at Taipale at the lake end of the line while developing their foothold at Summa; and in the third week of the offensive they began to seize positions on the Gulf of Finland. On February the 18th they were in possession of the station at Summa, and the Finns withdrew to positions slightly in the rear. It was noticeable that though the Finns were still taking Russian prisoners (at

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Kuhmo and north of Lake Ladoga) the Russians claimed no prisoners but only positions.

They continued, however, to test the line throughout its length. They now began to exercise pressure north-east of the Vuoksi river and attempted to advance across the ice of Lake Suovanto and the Taipale river. They were decisively defeated and an advance across the ice of Lake Ladoga, with tanks and armoured sledges, was checked by the batteries of the lake fort Konevitsa, about fifteen miles north of Taipale. On the 20th they gained a lodgement on the peninsula on which stood Koivisto, the fort guarding the right flank of the Mannerheim Line. They cleared the peninsula and captured the fort. This was the most important success so far secured; and yet the Finns reformed their defensive front and seemed prepared to resist indefinitely.

This impression was misleading. With the advance past the Koivisto islands the Russians were free of the interference of the coastal batteries, and the position of the ancient city of Viipuri became critical. It had been bombed almost to ruins; but its loss would be a blow of almost incalculable weight to Finnish *morale*. The new forts on the Bay of Viipuri were now under the concentrated fire of Russian artillery, for here, at the western end of the Mannerheim Line, the Russians were in great force.

Yet even at this point the position was not generally regarded as critical. It was recognized that the attack on the Mannerheim Line was wholly different in character from that brisk and brilliant fighting with which the Finns had destroyed one division after another. In the isthmus where the Russians were nearest to their main centres of supply and furnished with the best communications they were using the latest material and the tactics of the hour. But when the struggle was nearing its end instructed opinion was



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talking of the check which the heavy snows and subsequent thaws must impose, of the campaign as it would develop in the spring.

Even General Mannerheim, who had fought as skilfully as gallantly, was deceived for long about the chances of holding out; and it is not yet known when he abandoned hope. The Allies had come to the decision to send an expeditionary force to Finland late in the day. At first they had been content to send material: aeroplanes (405), guns (960), anti-tank guns (150) They had sent thousands of machine guns and hundreds of thousands of hand grenades, and much other material. Of course, material was necessary; but it is a strange fact that almost without exception the Allies placed their reliance upon material and over-rated its value apart from the stout human material which uses it.

General Mannerheim informed the Allies in the middle of January that he did not require men, as his resources in man-power were sufficient to last until the thaw came; but he said he would welcome 30,000 trained soldiers in May. The Allies were not completely reassured by this statement, and on February the 5th the Allied Supreme War Council decided to offer a fully-equipped expeditionary force of 100,000 men. The force was actually ready at the beginning of March. It was calculated that it could be in Scandinavia before the end of April, and during the second half of February the Finnish Government was told that if it appealed for help before March the 5th the troops would be dispatched. The French section of 50,000 men was concentrated at the point of embarkation on February the 26th.

But not wholly unexpected difficulties arose. At the beginning of March the Finnish Government, having informally sounded the Swedish Government, were told that the Allied forces could not be allowed passage across their terri-

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tory. The Finns therefore asked the Allies to allow them to postpone the date, March the 5th, as the last day for their decision. This sounds strange, since it is not clear that Sweden would grant to the Finns at their last gasp what they refused when there was still a little hope. The Finnish Government promised an answer not later than March the 12th. On March the 11th, however, it was announced that, 'according to information received by the Finnish News Bureau, contact has recently been established between the Government of the U.S.S.R.' through the medium of the Swedish Government. The Finnish deputation sent 'to negotiate' actually left Helsinki on Wednesday, March the 6th. The Finnish Government seems to have intended to negotiate at the beginning of March, when they were asking to be allowed to postpone their decision; but they wished to negotiate with a strong card in their hands. Whether this be the case or not, it is the fact that at 1.30 a.m. on March the 13th it was known that an agreement had been reached in Moscow between the Finnish Delegation and the Russian Government.

This version of the relations of the Allies to the Finnish Government is vouched for by both the British and French Governments. The Finnish Foreign Minister, M. Tanner, threw certain elements in the negotiations into higher relief. 'We have had volunteers,' he said, 'but volunteers have not been enough. We have unceasingly called for help. The neighbouring Scandinavian countries, for whom, for geographical reasons, it would have been easy to send troops, considered they could not do it. They were prevented by their attitude of strict neutrality. Repeated requests and appeals remained unanswered. In addition, their negative answer, which was made public, greatly damaged our military situation. The Western Powers, after some

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hesitation, announced that they were prepared to send a fully equipped expeditionary force, if we asked for it, and the promise was repeated several times.' But there was only one route by which the expeditionary force would arrive—via Norway and Sweden. 'Finland has repeatedly asked the Governments of these countries for permission to be given for transit,' but both refused categorically.

So Finland was driven to capitulate. At the end of February the troops had fallen back to their last line in front of Viipuri. The snow had now fallen and there may have been some hope of a respite, particularly as the Russian heavy artillery, which had been the decisive factor in compelling the first massive withdrawal, was not now so active. But Viipuri was now seen to be doomed, and its loss involved the opening of avenues to the main centres of administrative and industrial Finland. It involved much more than that. The Russians could not make effective use of their great numbers while they were penned in the Karelian isthmus, but once they were out of its constricting limits they could develop their full strength. It was the very purpose of the Mannerheim Line to oppose a decisive check to that development.

On March the 4th the position of Viipuri had changed little. Attempts to take it from the west by effecting a footing on the western shore of Viipuri Bay were decisively checked. There was still no trace of a breakdown. But on the following day a lodgement was secured on the north-western shore and several islands in the bay were captured a few days later. There were movements on other parts of the front with varying fortunes to both sides. But by this time the issues had already been transferred to negotiation and when at 11 a.m. on March the 13th hostilities ceased Viipuri was still in Finnish hands.

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By the peace terms Russia secured what she wanted and Finland's independence was a mere wraith of what it had been before the outbreak of war. The great obstacle to her successful defence of her independence was, of course, Germany.

Finland was part of the price demanded by Stalin for his pact with Hitler. It cannot be thought that it was palatable to Germany, which had such strong ties of earlier service to Finland; but she secured the chance of attacking the Western Powers without any interference in the East. Russia could wait, no doubt Hitler thought; and the campaign had suggested that it would provide easy game. Finland covered herself with glory, Russia with ignominy. The neutrals remained neutral when all their interests might have suggested vigorous interference.

## CHAPTER 9

### *Air Warfare and its Possibilities*

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**I**n a war that continually defied expectation the strangest feature was the evolution of operations in the air. When hostilities began it was assumed that Germany would attack Britain in force and attempt to lay waste not only its industrial cities, but also the main centres of population. So much was this taken for granted that an Air Raid Precautions department was set up in the Home Office as early as May 1935, and two years later the Air Raid Precautions Act was passed to provide for the payment of grants to local authorities for the organization of the Precautions services.

So it came about that a considerable organization existed when war broke out. In every part of the country there were air wardens, trained ambulance workers and auxiliary fire services. A considerable amount of instruction had been given to the general population, gas masks had been issued and fitted under supervision, and a type of shelter—the 'Anderson' shelter—had been distributed freely to the poorer people and sold to those among the better off who cared to have them. When war was declared the black-out was imposed and after a short period infractions were punished. Those who had to be out in the dark saw a new and

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unfamiliar countryside and, in the towns, learned to appreciate for the first time the real beauty of line.

The precautions were taken, but the raids were not carried out, though in the first days there were several false alarms. What had happened? It is now known that in spite of the assurances of members of the Government, the German air force was immensely greater than that of Britain and France combined. Why then did Germany hold her hand? The current explanation was that she knew she would receive blow for blow, but in view of the profound disparity between her air force and that of the Allies this argument is unconvincing. It seems much more probable that, feeling secure herself, Germany did not wish to assume the Allies were taking the war over-seriously. She thought, and for some time continued to think, that when Poland was beaten and occupied by Russia as well as herself, the Allies would recognize the accomplished fact and abandon the pretence of war.

When she found herself mistaken she had already had sufficient experience of the propaganda raids to recognize that there was no part of Germany which could not be reached by British bombers. But this, in a sense, seemed to confirm her previous opinion that the Allies were not wholly serious and would soon tire of a war which never appeared to wake from a state of suspended animation. How otherwise could one explain the omission of any attempt to interfere with the military operations against Poland? If the aeroplanes could distribute leaflets in every part of Germany, they could as easily have bombed the German lines of communication; and what a tremendous repercussion that would have had on the Poles. As it was, they appeared to be deserted by the Allies after receiving a solemn reassurance of help. So inexplicable did the prob-

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lem seem that a writer, not entirely notable for his affection for the Government, suggested that 'the British pledge to Poland was made with reservations'.

It is sufficient to note that the raids were never pressed beyond the educational sphere and it certainly seems that, at this point, the British Government were afraid to give the Germans a chance to make reprisals. Indeed the Royal Air Force appeared, for the first five or six months, to have adopted a sort of casuistry in their activities in order to be able to claim that they had not attacked on land. When an attack was delivered on the aerodromes on the Frisian Islands, machine-guns were used and not bombs, so that, by the meticulous care in aiming only at combatant units it might be suggested how far they were from even looking at a civilian or a land centre. This restriction of objectives continued well into the spring.

The Royal Air Force was, however, a very efficient service, and from the first days of the war it showed its mettle. Some time before the outbreak of the war its strength was 136 squadrons, of which 105 were stationed in Great Britain, and 20 squadrons of the Auxiliary Air Force. There were also the aeroplanes of the Fleet Air Arm; and the Auxiliary Air Force had a number of balloon squadrons. The best-known machine was the 'Spitfire', the fastest and handiest military aeroplane in the world; the Hurricane, with a top speed of about 350 miles per hour, was a close rival, and the Defiant came later on to assist in maintaining ascendancy over the German machine. The Blenheim and Wellington were the most famous bombers; and all shared in achieving a supremacy in the air that did much to offset the disparity in numbers.

Some of the squadrons which took part in the defence of Britain in the early days of the war, and laid down the lines

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upon which the Royal Air Force was to develop, belonged to the Auxiliary Service and were manned by men who had been engaged in civilian work only a few weeks before. It soon became clear that the German bombers could not withstand the British fighters; but the British bombers could beat German fighters. For several months, all the losses were on the German side and it was seen that as soon as a German bomber appeared, British fighters reacted like a disturbed wasps' nest

Through the enlightened judgement of General Smuts, whose memoranda to the Cabinet in the Great War still deserve reading, the Royal Air Force was a separate and independent service, and during the present war it developed on its own lines. It undertook the constant policing of the North Sea and the seas far out into the Western Atlantic, where it assisted in the convoy of the merchant shipping. This part of its work was carried out by the Coastal Command, which consisted of great flying-boats. Some of them had a loaded weight of 30 tons, a length of 60 feet, a wingspan of 80 feet, and a range of nearly 2,000 miles. Most of them were metal machines with specially designed gun-turrets. They maintained a constant anti-submarine patrol, kept a watch for and engaged enemy fighters, and checked the forays of enemy patrol vessels. Weather was no bar to them, and even in the bitter winter of 1939 their routine flights totalled over a million miles a month.

The Fleet Air Arm, which until the beginning of 1939 was part of the Royal Air Force, and is now part of the Navy, assisted the Coastal Command. Most cruisers carry one or two catapults and aeroplanes; and they were a standardized pattern so that they could fit into the lifts and be lowered from the alighting deck to their sea hangars. The cruisers were, from this point of view, a series of floating



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aerodromes<sup>\*</sup> and it was logical to assign to them, absolutely, the aeroplanes they used. Such aeroplanes as these were the eyes of the Navy and one was of great service in the battle of the Plate. There were other ships in the Navy which carried numbers of aeroplanes, and the aircraft carriers were early in the public eye through the German claim to have sunk one of them, the *Ark Royal*. The Fleet Air Arm was used, on occasion, for offensive purposes as well as for reconnaissance.

The Army, too, had squadrons working with them and under their operational control. The aeroplanes were specially designed to suit the work required, were carefully trained to work with the ground forces, but were under the final command of the Royal Air Force. Periodically during the early months of the war, some soldier or sailor started an agitation which, if it had been pursued to its logical end, would have led to the splitting up and division of the Royal Air Force between the two other services. This would have been a blunder of the first order. In the Great War there had been a Cabinet investigation into the whole matter and the Royal Air Force had been deliberately formed as an independent Service.

The Bomber Command was another department of the R.A.F., and its activities were of critical importance to the outcome of the war. In the raid on the Frisian Islands, planes of this command attacked the seaplanes lying at rest on their runways. It was these seaplanes which were engaged in laying magnetic mines in the estuaries and coastal waters of Britain. Much damage was done on this occasion and the bombers retorted in kind, in April, when they mined the Baltic shores of Germany. They also raided Kiel and Wilhelmshaven.

During the second quarter of 1940 the bombers began to

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attack military objectives in Germany and German occupied territory. They bombed oil depots, naval dockyards, munition works, railway junctions, canals, concentrations of barges, aerodromes and all manner of legitimate targets; and there cannot be the smallest doubt that they caused immense damage and produced widespread dismay. In spite of every effort of an all-powerful Government to prevent any information about the effect of the raids becoming known, it leaked out in various ways. A broadcast statement about payment to employees during the interruption of their work through damage to the factories where they were employed resembled too closely a telegraphed message from a Dusseldorf steel works in 1916. At that time the technique of bombing was in its infancy and this great steel works was only attacked by No. 3 Naval Wing. Yet the president telegraphed to the German High Command: 'At a meeting of the Board of Administration held to-day, reference was made by the steel works on the Western Front to the serious dislocation of work caused by air raids. The perpetually increasing curtailment of night work due to these raids not only results in an average decrease of thirty per cent of the steel works' output, but it is feared that night work may soon have to be entirely suspended. Since, in order to carry out the vast programme, we are instructed to increase production at these very works on the Western Front, we consider that better protection is absolutely necessary. All the works managers agree that the present military protection is entirely inadequate. We should be deeply grateful to the army administration if opportunity could be given as soon as possible for a representative to explain this serious position.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Major Grosskreutz in *Die Luftwacht*, June 1928, quoted from *The War in the Air*, vol. vi, p. 118.

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This was the result of less than 100 attacks and 917 bombs. According to German official figures there were *under 700 raids during the whole war* and the total number of bombs dropped amounted to only 14,208; and yet Major Grosskreutz stated that 'the direct destructive effect of the enemy air raids did not correspond with the resources expended for this purpose. On the other hand, the indirect effect, namely, falling off in *production of war industries* and also the *breaking down of the moral resistance of the nation*, cannot be too seriously estimated.'<sup>1</sup>

The number of large-scale raids carried out by the Royal Air Force in Germany and German occupied territory during the second three months of 1940 came to over 1,000. These included 161 on industrial targets, 229 on aerodromes, 258 on military objectives, and 275 on communications. The raids were carried out by day as well as by night; and on 66 occasions the German Navy was bombed.

The Fighter Command was responsible for the most spectacular part of the R.A.F. work. The Spitfire, with a speed of up to nearly 400 miles an hour and a power of manœuvre which invariably disconcerted their opponents, and the Hurricanes, for long held the proud record of having shot down numbers of bombers without losing a single machine. In the evacuation of Dunkirk the fighters played a most important part in safeguarding the Allied troops. They almost invariably attacked at great odds and inflicted three to four times the damage they suffered. Whether they were piloted by professional airmen or by men who had only recently left the desk or the factory, they were the most efficient machines engaged in the war, and only their crews' amazing courage and skill saved the Allies in the face of so grave a disparity.

<sup>1</sup> *The War in the Air*, vol. vi, p. 153.

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The armament of the aeroplanes varied greatly. Some of the single-seater fighters carry four fixed machine guns in each wing and with expert handling this proves a deadly armament. Some bombers have a number of movable machine guns in front, just behind the wings, and in the tail. With their crew of five they can fire from a number of angles, whereas the single-seater fighter must manœuvre to attack. Some 'planes carry small cannon, 20-23 mm calibre. Some of the later two-seater Messerschmitts carry two cannons as well as a number of machine guns.

One of the most startling revelations of the war is the difficulty aeroplanes find in sinking warships. Even at anchor the total casualties from bombing attacks were few, and when in motion almost negligible. The reason appears to be that apart from their protective skins, most warships are now floating concentrations of anti-aircraft guns, and no bomber can keep its course and release its bombs skilfully in face of a bombardment from the massed guns.

Although the scope of air warfare developed in the spring and summer of 1940 it is still a problem how far it can be pressed. It has achieved much, but it is very doubtful if it has reached full development. The general military theory is that it is and must remain a purely ancillary service. General Smuts in his report to the Cabinet during the last war wrote: 'The day may not be far off when aerial operations with their devastation of enemy lands and destruction of industrial and populous centres on a vast scale may become the principal operations of war, to which the older forms of military and naval operations may become secondary and subordinate.'<sup>1</sup>

There is here a term, 'populous centres', which is ambiguous and, for the sake of the argument, had better be

<sup>1</sup> *The War in the Air*, p. 12

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ignored; but the meaning of the summing up is very clear. It does not look upon air warfare in the same way as the soldiers and sailors, but contemplates a development which is as yet far off.

The Italian military writer, General Douhet, expounded a plan in which the Air Force should play the principal role. It took as its fundamental assumption, its *terminus a quo*, a defensive on sea and land, a typically Gallic pre-war idea, and the adoption of the offensive by air. His plan was to anticipate a declaration of war by sending out vast bombing squadrons to destroy at once every enemy aeroplane before it could leave the ground. This phase of the attack should be pressed without fear or scruple; and, when it was complete, the assailant would have complete mastery of the air. Then he should proceed to break up the enemy mobilization and concentration, destroy his railways, his communications and his barracks. With this his ground force would perish. Then his war potential—his factories, his telephone centres, his electrical undertakings and everything necessary to his war effort—should be destroyed.

General Douhet postulated great numbers of aeroplanes, but held that though they should be armoured and heavily armed, great speed was not necessary. He had no belief in the defensive against air attacks; and, in actual fact, he does not seem to have been far wrong in that particular. Anti-aircraft defences, so far, have proved capable of putting the attack off its mark, but have had no great success in destroying the planes which carry it out. For the rest, the plan was carried out in Poland with almost complete success as to its first phase; but the mobilization, concentration and factories were not much affected. It contrived to *de-cerebrate* the military organism; but it is difficult to think the effect would have been fundamental if the Russians had not

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attacked from the east when the campaign was at a crisis.

The plan was attempted in Belgium, but there it had less success, as the 'planes were removed from most of the aerodromes before the attack. It had more success in Holland, less in France. In spite of the limitations in the success of the plan it is not reasonable, it is impossible to say that it was applied wholeheartedly or that it represents the most perfect development of air warfare. In Poland certainly the success was very great indeed; and it has to be admitted that the army mobilization and concentration, such as they were, had been carried out before the air attack. In none of the other cases was the attack made out of a completely cloudless sky.

It cannot, therefore, be said that the plan was ever tested thoroughly. Perhaps it is just as well, since it relies upon a brutal cynicism from which Hitler might almost learn a lesson; and it depends upon that, upon complete surprise. Otherwise the 'planes might be in the air, or on other aerodromes, as in Belgium. The plan would, therefore, succeed little more than any other form of attack delivered as a complete surprise. In fact, logically, it is more correctly an example of how to profit by surprise than of the possibilities of air warfare. Apart from this, it merely lays down the objects of attack and the order of their importance.

The possibilities of air warfare are still unfathomable. To some extent the conditions have been against a complete test. The reason of this is the almost universal consensus of opinion among soldiers. A famous French general, for instance, put the matter in this way: 'No country believes that war could be won by aircraft acting alone, because they are incapable of exploiting the destruction they cause. . . Aviation can destroy, but not exploit the

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results of its material disorganization.' There is nothing singular about this opinion, it is a fairly typical soldier's point of view. If by some unhappy mischance the Air Force had been divided between the Army and Navy, there can be little doubt that the matter would have gone no further. General Smuts thought the Air Force should be a Service so that it might develop its own strategy, tactics and tradition.

In the French general's statement, it may be noted that he used the words '*acting alone*'. Now not even General Douhet insisted that the aircraft should act entirely '*alone*'. He postulated a defensive, sufficiently strong presumably to withstand an *attaque brusquée*. Indeed, it seems unreasonable to discuss air warfare as it were *in vacuo*. What is of importance to discuss is the possibility of such warfare *à outrance*, the chances, of course, if all scruple is cast overboard and the 'populous centres' are specifically aimed at are different and may indeed have an entirely different influence on the issue of a war.

What seems debatable is the assumption that it is necessary to 'occupy' as well as destroy. Is that quite certain? In Poland, the German armies for the most part made no attempt to occupy the aerodromes they destroyed; yet they certainly produced a state of affairs that deprived the army of its effective direction. What would happen if, for example, the productive capacity of factories could be reduced not 30 per cent, as at Dusseldorf in 1916, but 50, or 80 per cent? What would happen if all the junctions, but the smallest, could be put out of action and maintained in that state? What would happen if the present destruction in Germany could be raised to the *nth*? Would not the question of 'occupation' then become an irrelevance?

If the victim of such action could not put a stop to such an

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offensive, it is difficult to see how he could carry on. When the question of 'occupation' is raised it seems to ignore the possibility of there being vital centres or services which can be interrupted. It may be that in the highly developed modern State, there are no such vital centres or services. But if that were the case, and it does not seem at all certain, another question might be posed. It is the German contention that they were not beaten *militarily* in 1918, but were betrayed on the home front. It is not true; but there is this glimmer of truth in it. There was certainly a breakdown in *morale* at the front and some part of it was due to the failure inside Germany. The army in a people's war must to some extent reflect the home *morale*. If this is true, is it not possible that the army might be undermined by the cumulative effect of cessation of production, immobilization of the means of transport and widespread failure of *morale*? Major Grosskreutz spoke of 'the *breaking down of the moral resistance of the nation*' as a result of the few and comparatively weak raids of the Great War. Once more, imagine the development of the air offensive raised to the *nth*.

The whole question seems to be reducible to the possibility of acquiring a sufficient superiority in the air. Imagine this achieved. Is it impossible the Air Force should not also contrive to 'occupy' in such circumstances? The parachutists and 'plane-carried troops had a decisive effect in Holland, because they were placed in such a position that they turned the main defences. If the Air Force had a sufficient superiority it does not seem impossible they should land sufficient troops to occupy a foothold on which the Army might be landed. Indeed it is difficult to conceive of any large-scale invasion without the intimate and massive collaboration of the Air Force.

If it should be urged that this would not be a case of the



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aeroplanes 'acting alone', it must be recognized that the services very rarely act 'alone'. The Navy carries its occupying force in the Marines. The Army could not exist, even on its own soil, without the effective co-operation of the Navy. In fine, the suggestion that the Air Force 'acting alone' cannot win a war is a piece of pedantry that is unworthy of discussion.

But the possibility of the air operations occupying the principal instead of the secondary part in a campaign is most important. The following propositions connected with it are little likely to be disputed. If the Air Force of any country were known to have a numerical, and corresponding moral, superiority similar to that of the total German force over the Allies at the beginning of the war, it is very unlikely that there would be war with it. If the present British air campaign against Germany can be developed to ten times its strength, the German staff would be compelled to sacrifice everything to defeat it or to consider the possibility of a compromise peace.

These propositions mean no more than the feasibility of the suggestion made by General Smuts. They imply, in fact, that it is not always necessary to 'occupy' the territories which one compels the enemy to evacuate; but that surely is a commonplace. At the Armistice in 1918 the Germans were standing on foreign soil in various parts of Europe, but were glad to evacuate all occupied territory *in return for an agreement to cease the attack*. Something of that sort might well happen if an air offensive against purely military objectives were to be carried out relentlessly by an immense force.

It is obvious that the heavy air-raids on British ports and shipping that began to develop in July 1940 were far from negligible in themselves and contained in them the germ of

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what might possibly grow into a counter-blockade, which though, perhaps, not quite so serious as the submarine blockade at its worst, would certainly disturb the British economy. It seems certain that this campaign, long-threatened against Britain, was one of the few German projects that promised to have any effect on a supreme sea power. But clearly it involved operations against a moving target; and, from the beginning, the aeroplane had had singularly little effect in that direction. It was, accordingly, most successful against the slowest vessels.

One thing, at least, it demonstrated: the possibilities in air attack were seen to be capable of considerable development. But it is very far from general recognition that the role of the aeroplane in warfare is still only in its infancy. It is impossible to think that no more than twenty or thirty armed men will ever be transported in a troop-carrying 'plane. It is impossible to think that no more effective bombs will ever be discovered. It is inconceivable that there will never be speedier and more highly armoured 'planes

In some directions the aeroplane is admittedly a grave danger to which nobody has yet found the appropriate reply. The low-flying, 'dive'-bomber, seems rarely to have failed of its effect against ground forces. This is not because nobody can think of the correct tactics to defeat it. Bren guns, artillery and even rifles can put the aeroplanes out of action at once, if the troops using them keep their heads, and fire at the appropriate moment. The siren bombs have a wholly disproportionate effect; but it is *moral*; and, once more, all that is necessary is to keep a cool head. The 'sirens' were at first merely a braking system to control the burst of the bomb. By the use of a series of tubes the bombs could be compelled to burst above the ground on

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contact, and produce a much more damaging effect on bodies of troops. No doubt the moral effect of the 'sirens' has been so considerable that such bombs are being more frequently used. But there is no specific for the retention of cool heads and stout hearts any more than for their production; once, however, men have learned the facts, the danger of a breakdown and consequent damage should be minimized.

The means for dealing with night bombing raids has not yet been discussed. It is clear that at night the superiority which the fighter enjoys in daylight is very considerably reduced. The anti-aircraft guns, which are theoretically an excellent match for the aeroplane, now that range-finding has been so highly developed and sound detectors are so efficient, in actual fact are not strikingly successful. The balloon-barrage has claimed its victims and its use seems to face the assailant with a dilemma. If the aeroplane remains at a great height it cannot aim effectively. If it comes lower it may be caught either by the guns or the balloon-barrage.

Indeed, it seems to be unchallengeable that, however sceptical one may be about the development of air power into a decisive element in victory, the aeroplane is in some respects at an advantage in attack as compared with the defence. No-one has found a means of preventing air-raids, even in face of a great numerical superiority in the air. Nobody will promise that with the most perfect defensive, more than a small proportion of vessels will be wholly immune from damage unless they are covered by considerable concentrations of fighters. In actual warfare this condition is very difficult indeed to observe. The raiders can choose their time and the fighters cannot always be on the wing. The one precaution that promises to be effective is the provision of a heavier support from destroyers.

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What the defensive seems able to do is to limit the material damage; but for this it is necessary to have a great provision of searchlights and anti-aircraft guns. Even these are not wholly effective against resolute attack. It seems, in fine, that there are still tremendous possibilities in the development of the air offensive. If the targets are carefully selected, and the attacks pressed home with relentless vigour and repeated persistently, it is far from improbable that such a campaign will pave the way for victory.

## CHAPTER 10

### *The Norwegian Interlude*

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It is obvious that the conduct of the economic war must interfere with the normal conceptions of national sovereignty; but the German method of making war interfered with them still more. If the Allies imposed restrictions on the trade of neutrals, the Germans not only interfered with it but prevented it so far as it was not conducted wholly in their interest; and by sinking neutral vessels without warning they destroyed their property and even the lives of their nationals. German policy was one of terrorism; and, in condemning the brutality, the Allies failed to see that it was effective. When the realization broke upon them they were disturbed to find that there seemed to be no redress. They were determined to make war according to their tenets. As they had gone to war in the first instance because a lawbreaker was loose in Europe, it seemed to them that they must order their behaviour according to international law. Thus they suffered from the Germans complete ignoring of every law and human precept and were bound by legal prescription in bringing the criminal to book.

It needed the robust realism of America to point the moral as it must have appeared to many:

‘This creature will never be beaten by civilized rules.

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Somebody has to get in the gutter with him and fight the way he fights, only more cruelly.

'This is no time to prate about humanitarian ideals. The Allies are dealing with a wild beast, a monster utterly lacking in principle . . .

'Hitler is just a dirty fighter. We Americans are potential victims. Let us get over our squeamishness and get tough. This mad force must be restrained'<sup>1</sup>

But the Allies could not put that principle into practice, although it was clear to them that Hitler was worse than a man merely 'lacking in principle'. Even a savage has some taboos, some customs that act in restraint; but Hitler was a civilized man who had turned his whole mind to the accomplishment of insensate ambition at whatever cost to those who stood in his way. He was, for instance, dependent on the Swedish iron ore, which has a higher metal content than any other, and this involved access to the mines at Kiruna and Gellivare. There are two ways in which this can be achieved during the seven summer months; but, during winter, only one Lulea, the Swedish port on the Gulf of Bothnia, has a single track railway and cannot take the whole of the traffic even while the gulf is ice-free; but Narvik, a first-rate naval base, is a great port with good wharfage and, as it is ice-free, it is the only means by which the ore can be exported during the winter. A railway connects the port with the mining districts, and the port plys a thriving trade. Now during the first eight months of the war Germany had been importing the necessary ore without the Allies having any power to stop the traffic. It is true that they also imported the ore, but their ore-carrying vessels had to run the gauntlet of the submarine blockade, whereas the Germans, by hugging the protection of Norwegian terri-

<sup>1</sup> From *The Boston Traveller*, June 1940.

## *The Altmark*

torial waters, could if they wished avoid interference almost completely.

## *The Altmark*

This practice became more and more intolerable, as the pressure of the economic war was seen to be decisive if applied completely, but must be long drawn out if subject to such evasion. It is difficult to think that international law could possibly be interpreted in this way, and the Allies could no longer afford to see their force flouted through Norwegian impotence to enforce the law rigidly. Their hand, however, was forced in an unexpected way. The auxiliary *Altmark* was in touch with the *Graf Spee* a few days before the battle of the River Plate, but although the British Navy made a thorough search for her they could find no trace until Thursday, February the 15th, when she was discovered making her way southwards within Norwegian territorial waters. On the approach of H.M.S. *Intrepid* she took refuge in Josing Fjord and orders were issued by the Admiralty that even if this involved entering neutral waters the vessel should be searched, and any prisoners found on board rescued.

The *Graf Spee* had destroyed seven British merchantmen in the south Atlantic before Christmas, and taking the officers on board had placed the crews in the *Altmark*. It would have been intolerable that this vessel should carry to Germany 299 officers and men; and yet it very nearly accomplished that feat, for Josing Fjord lies almost at the southwest extremity of Norway, only a few miles from the beginning of the Skagerrak.

Captain P. L. Vian in H.M.S. *Cossack* approached the fjord

## *The Norwegian Interlude*

and was met at the mouth by two Norwegian gunboats. He offered to place a joint British and Norwegian guard upon the vessel and in company with the Norwegian gunboats escort it to Bergen, where a proper search could be made and the matter be dealt with according to international law. The Norwegian commander refused, stating that he was acting under instructions from his Government and that the ship was unarmed. He gave an assurance that there could be no prisoners on board as the vessel had been twice examined in Norwegian ports. Captain Vian asked that the assurance should be put to the proof as he had previously suggested. After some further conversation the Norwegian commander consented to take passage in the *Cossack* and to accompany the *Cossack's* boarding party to the *Altmark*; but in the end he refused.

Meanwhile the *Altmark* which, was jammed in an ice pack in the inner end of the fjord, began to work her engines and in spite of an order to stop attempted to ram the *Cossack* as the latter approached. As a result the *Altmark* grounded. The *Cossack* at once grappled herself to the *Altmark* and boarded her. Firing broke out on both sides; but the ship was taken over and on a search being made the British prisoners were found locked in shell rooms, store rooms and an empty oil tank. During the search, part of the armed guard put on board by the *Graf Spee* escaped over the stern of the ship to high ground at the side of the fjord and opened fire. The fire was returned and two Germans escaping over the ice were hit. It was discovered that the *Altmark* carried two pompoms and four machine-guns, and one of the officers stated that the vessel had been twice visited in Norwegian waters, but had not been searched. When the *Cossack* had taken off the prisoners she left the fjord.



### *Allied Minefields Laid*

It is difficult to realize how this small incident affected the British people. They were electrified, as if a great victory had been won. It seemed at the time that the Germans were being allowed to act as they pleased and the event which showed that there were limits to British forbearance delighted everyone. Their pleasure was not damped by the honest attempts of the Norwegian Government to justify themselves and place the Allies in the dock; but the consensus of foreign opinion was that the action was perfectly proper in the circumstances and the ripples of the disturbance gradually died away.

But it was to have a memorable sequel. The action expressed and at the same time strengthened the determination of the Allies to insist upon a stricter observance of neutrality. It was known that they were concerting measures to effect this change; but, when they again intervened, their action was to cut across a much more drastic intervention of Germany which at once transformed the tempo of the war.

### *Allied Minefields Laid*

Some two months later the Allied naval forces laid minefields at three points in Norwegian territorial waters. This was done early on the morning of Monday, April the 8th. The Norwegian Government was notified that the mines were to be laid and in their justification the Allies pointed out that international law recognizes the right to take reprisal. The areas at Bodo, Bud and Stadtland were notified as having been made 'dangerous to shipping on account of mines'; but at the same time it was pointed out that there would be no interference with the free access of Norwegians

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to any of their ports. British naval vessels were to patrol the areas for forty-eight hours from the laying of the first mine in order to give warning. The Norwegian Government at once issued a solemn protest calling for the removal of the mines and the patrolling vessels. These events were all announced in the morning papers of April the 9th; and there was also another announcement . . . three German ships were sunk off the Norwegian coast the day before. One of them was described as a troopship, the 6,800 ton Hamburg *Rio de Janeiro*, from which soldiers jumped into the sea, many being rescued by small vessels which put off from the Norwegian coast, though 150 were lost. The submarine which sank the troopship obviously could not take them on board.

It is necessary to bear all these events in mind since the next day it was seen that the whole episode was out of perspective; and it was not for some time that the true sequence of events could be grasped. The Germans made an immediate outcry about the illegal action of the Allies and attempted to give the air of reprisal to their own action, which however, had been long concerted and was actually launched before the Allies laid their mines.

## *The Naval Engagements*

Five days before, German troopships and covering forces set sail. On the evening of April the 5th, while these vessels were approaching their destination, the German Minister in Oslo gave a party to which he invited members of the Norwegian Government and most of the well-known people in the capital. The party took place at his legation and there he exhibited a film, *The Baptism of Fire*, which

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showed how Germany makes war. The bad taste was appreciated; but the cynicism did not appear for some days.

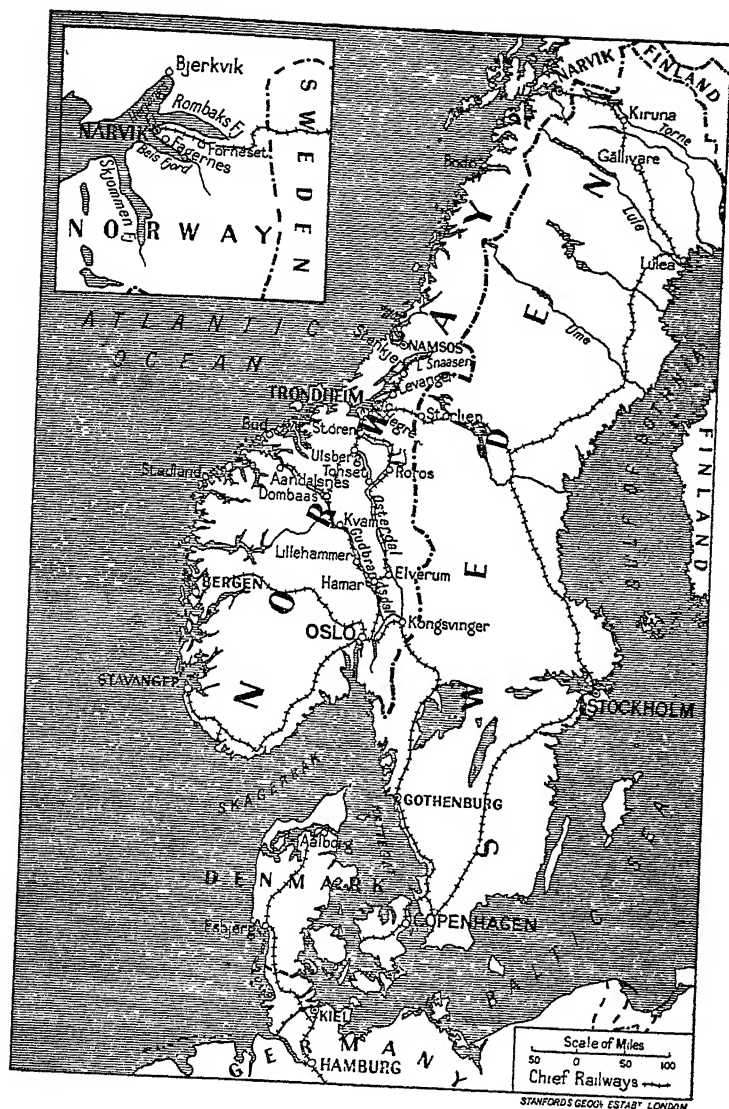
On the following day a British reconnaissance 'plane patrolling Heligoland Bight, as a matter of routine, reported that part of the German High Seas Fleet was out and heading north; and the Grand Fleet weighed anchor. It was on the next day, April the 8th, that a British submarine challenged the *Rio de Janeiro* and when it attempted to escape, sank it. The minefields were being laid when the *Glowworm* became isolated and, in an encounter with the German cruiser *Hipper* and four destroyers, was sunk. The Grand Fleet, swept down the North Sea as far as Bergen, coming under heavy bombardment from German aeroplanes, and the flagship *Rodney* was struck and slightly damaged. The old battle cruiser *Renown* had not been able to take position in the fleet and as light broke on the morning of April the 9th it was in the latitude of Narvik. It was one of those days that are frequent during winter in these waters. There was a strong wind, the seas ran high and there was a blinding snowstorm; and as she steamed through these inhospitable waters the *Renown* suddenly sighted the new German battle cruiser *Scharnborst*, and the heavy cruiser *Hipper*. She at once opened fire at 18,000 yards. She carries six 15-inch guns as against the twelve 11-inch guns of the *Scharnborst* and the eight 8-inch guns of the *Hipper*. Her speed is 29 knots as against the *Scharnborst's* 27 and the *Hipper's* 32. If the German ships had adopted the tactics of the *Exeter*, *Ajax* and *Achilles* in the River Plate action it is almost impossible the *Renown* could have escaped without, at least, grave injury. But the policy of avoiding action with more heavily armed opponents and attacking only the weaker was applied throughout the German armed forces; and so the *Scharnborst*, on receiving two salvoes, at once

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turned away. She had been badly hit. Smoke was rising from her in a dense pillar and one of her turrets had been knocked out. The *Hipper* at once laid a smoke screen, and though the *Renown* gave her a few moments' attention, both were soon out of sight, after an action lasting barely a quarter of an hour. But it had lasted long enough for the *Renown* to order the second destroyer flotilla to join her; and hence the way to Narvik was left open.

## *The Invasion of Norway*

For it was on this day that the Germans had occupied Denmark and had invaded Norway. Denmark was, of course, little more than a pawn in the German strategy. The country offered some plunder in foodstuffs, dairy produce, hens, pigs and cattle; but in this respect it was a wasting asset, since forage and oilcake were necessary if the cattle were not to die. But, in the German plans for Scandinavia, Denmark figured more prominently as the country through which run the Great Belt, which can take vessels of the heaviest draught and is ten miles at its narrowest, and the Little Belt, while it forms one shore of the Sound. It, therefore, commands the entrance into the Baltic and affords a bridge-head for the invasion of Sweden. For her present purpose it commanded the waterways to Norway. As it has a common frontier with Germany in the new province of Slesvig, and has almost completely disarmed, there was no attempt at organized resistance and the German forces crossed into Danish territory with little more trouble than if they had been marching into another part of Germany. A few of the garrison troops who attempted to resist were quickly overcome; and, as the plan of invasion



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had been carefully prepared, the occupation was practically complete by the evening. Denmark had a strong German minority and the way had been well prepared

The weather favoured the German operations against Norway; but here, too, they would not have proceeded so smoothly if there had not been a few prominent German sympathizers, and also some carelessness on the part of the Norwegian authorities. Some British critics attempted to make capital out of the failure of the British Intelligence Service; but, where the Norwegian authorities failed to take note of the number of vessels with undisclosed roles in their main ports, it is a little difficult to blame the British Intelligence Service for not seeing further. The Allied Governments had for some months been drawing the attention of the Norwegian Government to the danger of a German attack and had suggested staff conversations in order to provide a plan for dealing with any such movement. But the Norwegian Government refused, as indeed did every other neutral government so approached. The attitude was intelligible; but it placed a premium on a German success and, in fact, made self-defence against a completely unscrupulous enemy almost impossible.

As it happened—Oslo, Bergen, Trondhjem and Narvik were seized with only a show of resistance on April the 9th. The best aerodrome in the country, at Stavanger, was also taken over. The thing seemed so incredible that Mr. Chamberlain actually declared in the Commons that Narvik was probably a mistake for the small port of Larvik near the entrance of the Oslo Fjord.

There was a newly mined area at Bodo, not many miles south of the Lofoten islands, which cover the entrance of the vast fjord which leads to Narvik, and a destroyer flotilla was supposed to be patrolling in the neighbourhood. As we

## *The Invasion of Norway*

have already seen the destroyers had been called away when the *Renown* encountered the *Scharnborst* and *Hipper*. But the whole operation came as an unpleasant shock and the details of the operations do not make them more credible, though they unfortunately took place.

The Norwegian mobilization had been ordered as a precautionary measure, but it was too late. This was but another instance of the difficulty that democracies, so admirable in a peaceful and orderly world, find in adapting themselves to organized disorder. The first German troops were landed at the Oslo aerodrome at Fornebu about dawn; and there seem to have been fewer than 2,000 men when about 3 p.m. the mounted police cleared the way for the march up the boulevard of Karl Johan. But the landing of troops was only part of a carefully organized plan which was carried out with almost unbelievable perfection. It depended mainly upon surprise and, of course, also upon the slowness of a community steeped in a tradition of peace to react to mass violence.

Oslo lies at the head of a long fjord which, before it divagates into the long narrow channel that leads to the capital, is commanded by a strong naval base at Horten and the batteries at Rauer and Bolaerne. About midnight on April 8th it was learned at Horten that the Rauer and Bolaerne batteries were engaging foreign warships which were attempting to enter the fjord. At this time there lay at Horten *Olav Tryggvason*, a 1596 ton vessel armed with 4.7 inch guns and the minesweepers *Otra* and *Rauma* which were at once cleared for action. *Otra*, with the chief of Staff, went out to reconnoitre and the three vessels contrived to sink two armed transports and the destroyer *Albatross*. The cruiser *Emden* was also damaged by *Olav Tryggvason* and put out of action; but at daybreak German

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troops had succeeded in landing and the base was threatened by three cruisers and a number of bombers. The small garrison had no alternative but to surrender. When the main German force attempted to enter the Narrows it was met by the fire of the fortress Oscarsborg which sank the cruiser *Bluecher* and hit the battleship *Gneisenau*. The battleship succeeded in passing the fortress only to be torpedoed from the shore and in spite of attempts to beach the vessel it eventually sank with the German administrative staff. The other German ships made no further attempt to enter the fjord.

It was later than this, after the landing of troops and the arrival of German warships, that the Norwegian Foreign Minister received an ultimatum from the German Minister, who had anticipated events by showing members of the Government the terroristic film some days before. At 4 30 a.m. the German Minister handed to Dr Koht a memorandum which stated that while the Allies had consistently attacked neutral countries Germany still tried to defend their rights. She had proof that the Allies intended to occupy Narvik and other ports in Norway and that the Norwegian Government would not resist the occupation or if it did would not be successful. The German Government had therefore begun certain military operations for the occupation of strategically important places in Norway to secure Norway against the planned occupation by the Allies. They had not, therefore, landed as enemies and the German Government expected the Norwegian Government and people to accept and fully understand the German action. After certain threats the memorandum concluded with a list of measures which the Government was expected to take forthwith: to instruct the people not to resist, to order the Norwegian Army to co-operate with the German forces, to hand over military establishments and fortifications to



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the Germans; and so on. After consultation with the Government, Dr. Koht informed the German Minister that the demands were such that no independent country could accept them and they were determined to maintain and defend their independence.

The King, Crown Prince and Princess, the Government and Storthing left Oslo and moved to Hamar on Lake Mjosa; but, threatened by a German detachment, moved to Elverum, some miles to the north-east. But by this time Oslo was in German hands and a puppet premier, Herr Quisling, who had a few days before been in Berlin, was ruling, with the visible assistance of a German official in an hotel.

While these events were taking place in Oslo, Bergen, the second most important port in Norway, Stavanger, Trondhjem, the ancient capital of the country, and Narvik had been occupied. In Bergen German ships carrying troops and war material had been lying for some days. During the night two German cruisers and two destroyers entered Bergen harbour and at dawn landed a company of soldiers who carried white flags and announced that they came as friends. The commander of one of the batteries opened fire and a few soldiers also resisted and were killed. The entrance into the harbour had been delayed by a Norwegian minesweeper which succeeded in laying mines in the path of the German ships. A torpedo boat was also able to get within range and launch a torpedo. The Kvarenfast was captured by German troops and Hellen surrendered after bombardment from the air. The port was quickly in German hands. Very shortly before, a convoy of 37 ships had left it and the United States *Mormacsea* escaped with more than a million of Swedish gold. The German cruiser *Koln* was seen by a British submarine as she was entering the harbour and torpedoed. She was taken

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to the quay and there the Royal Air Force completed the destruction.

Narvik, which was the most important of the German objectives, was captured in much the same way. During the night six of the largest and newest German destroyers entered the harbour. Outside was one of the two Norwegian guardships of 4,000 tons, the *Norge* and *Eidsvold*. Each carried two 8 2 and six 6-inch guns. A German officer boarded the *Eidsvold* and demanded its surrender. As the commander refused, the officer fired a Very light before leaving it; and it was at once torpedoed. The *Norge* was in position inside the entrance to the harbour and at once opened fire as the destroyers entered and damaged two of them. But the guardships were, in any case, no match for the German force, though they had cleared for action twenty hours before the arrival of the enemy. There was, in fact, no adequate force at hand to deal with the Germans, who knew what they had to do and did it with expediency. The British Consul was shot and British seamen and residents were quickly rounded up and imprisoned in the whale-factory ship *Jan Wellem*. After the first battle of Narvik they escaped and joined the survivors of the *Hardy*. But all went swimmingly at first; and, in an astonishingly short time, the port was in German hands.

It was impossible for the Allies to accept the German occupation of Norway without some attempt to oust the invader; but the capture of Narvik was more astonishing and more disturbing. Germany occupied Norway in order to secure her supply of Swedish iron ore and to capture the timber and metal supplies there. But her main strategic object was the occupation of bases for an offensive against the British blockade. The British blockading lines at the time would be outflanked by a force holding Narvik and so

## *The First Battle of Narvik*

fine a naval base would allow Germany a measure of liberty for attacks on British commerce and coasts, and would give her a greater purchase on trade from the north Russian ports. The Admiralty could not contemplate the prospect with equanimity and when it heard that six German destroyers had entered the harbour the news was passed on to the second destroyer flotilla, which had been watching the minefields in the neighbourhood until summoned to join the *Renown*. The flotilla consisted of the *Hardy*, *Hunter*, *Havoc*, *Hostile*, and *Hotspur* under the command of Captain B. A. W. Warburton-Lee.

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The Admiralty passed on to Captain Warburton-Lee all the information at its disposal, which consisted of the news of the arrival of six destroyers—there were actually nine—and a number of supply ships. The commander asked at 1 a.m. whether he was to attack and he was told to use his discretion. In half an hour he informed the Admiralty that he intended to attack at dawn. It was a daring decision, as it could not be known how many German vessels were in the fifty miles of winding waters and of what category they were. As it happened the Germans were all more recent and more powerful vessels. They were of 1,800 tons with five 5-inch guns and eight torpedo tubes. The *Hardy* had a 1,500-ton displacement, while the other four destroyers were of only 1,330 tons; all had an armament of 4.7-inch guns, the *Hardy* carrying five and the others four. There was thus an immensely heavier weight of gunfire against them; and as they steamed up the fjord they were fired at by small guns from the shore.

## *The Norwegian Interlude*

The *Hardy* led the flotilla into the harbour, which was packed with shipping among which were two German destroyers. They opened a heavy fire as they steamed round and turning towards the entrance they fired their torpedoes. One destroyer split asunder under the impact and the other was in flames. The flotilla then steamed round once more and on this occasion two more destroyers appeared and were engaged. These too were badly damaged and the shore guns had ceased to fire. A third time the flotilla steamed round the harbour; but on this occasion they fared differently. Until now they had inflicted heavy damage and received hardly any; but now three fresh destroyers appeared from the Rombaks Fjord, a continuation of the fjord east of Narvik. They had the advantage of knowing what faced them and they advanced at full speed firing rapidly. The flotilla at once suffered heavy damage. The *Hunter* was sunk. The *Hotspur* was seriously and the *Hostile* slightly damaged. The *Hardy* came under concentrated fire. A hit on the bridge killed or seriously wounded every one on it, including the captain, except the latter's secretary, Paymaster-Lieutenant G. H. Stanning, who navigated the ship at full speed towards the outer fjord. The undamaged guns were still firing when a hit in the engine-room gave warning of the end and Paymaster-Lieutenant Stanning ran the *Hardy* ashore.

Captain Warburton-Lee ordered the men to abandon ship and look to themselves. Attempts were made to take the captain to safety, but he died on the raft and was buried on the beach. His gallantry was rewarded by a posthumous Victoria Cross, the first of the war.

The *Hostile* and *Havoc* assisted the *Hotspur* to safety. As they left the fjord they encountered the supply ship *Ravensfeld*, and finding it to be carrying ammunition they sank it.

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The German destroyers were in no mood to pursue. Two, *Anton Schmidt* and *Wilhelm Heidkamp*, had been sunk and a third was disabled. In addition six supply ships were sunk. About 170 of the *Hardy's* men reached shore and after many vicissitudes, were brought back to England by the *Warspite*.

## *The Second Battle*

Three days later the British sailors were avenged. The old battleship *Warspite*, flying the flag of the officer commanding the Battle Cruiser Squadron, Vice-Admiral W. J. Whitworth, was accompanied by nine destroyers, *Icarus*, *Hero*, *Foxhound*, *Kimberley*, *Forrester*, *Bedouin*, *Punjabi*, *Eskimo*, and *Cossack*. The *Warspite* carries four aeroplanes and is armed with eight 15-inch guns. At the outset the risks of the enterprise became apparent, for a German submarine was waiting at the entrance of the fjord; but it was sunk by one of the *Warspite's* aeroplanes. *Icarus* and *Bedouin* led the way into the fjord and shortly after noon a German destroyer was sighted and engaged. Two more destroyers then appeared and one was found to be lurking in a bay on the south side of the fjord. Finally there were six German destroyers. But the result was never in doubt. After a running fight, in which some of the German destroyers attempted to escape by steaming into Rombaks Fjord, all (*Dietber von Rode*, *Hans Ludermann*, *Wolfgang Zenker*, *Bernd von Armin*, *Erich Koellner*, *Hermann Kunne* and *Erich Giese*) were destroyed, the shore batteries had been silenced, the *Hardy's* survivors rescued. The *Warspite* left with three of the destroyers which had been damaged. The second battle of Narvik fully avenged the first

## *The Norwegian Interlude*

### *The Trondhjem Operations*

Meanwhile Trondhjem had fallen. This city, the ancient capital of Norway, had been seized by tactics similar to those used in Oslo, Bergen and Narvik. But it played a special role in the German operations. Trondhjem is the keystone of the railways that radiate from Oslo. From the capital one line dips down into Sweden, another runs north-east to Kongsvinger, where it turns south to Sweden and also north-west through the Osterdal valley, to Storen and Trondhjem. Another line from Oslo threads the Gudbrandsdal valley to Aandsnes, throwing off a branch towards the north-east, to Storen and Trondhjem. The old capital also has direct railway communication with Sweden and sends a line north-east to Namsos. It stands at the head of a great fjord, at the mouth of which it is guarded by the fort of Agdenes. About twelve miles to the east is a fine aerodrome, at Varnes, and five or six miles still farther to the east on the railway line running to Sweden is a smaller well-built fort, Hegra.

Until Trondhjem was securely held the Germans were only precariously established in Norway. If the Allies wished to turn them out of the country they must at all costs prevent the Oslo garrison linking up with the detachment at Trondhjem. If they could occupy this city the Norwegians would have a commodious and dignified capital and centre from which to rule the country and keep the German occupation, at worst, within bounds. Sooner or later they might expect to clear the country. When the Norwegian Government fell back from Oslo to Hamar and later to Elverum, they succeeded for some days in preventing the Germans from advancing up the two valleys towards Trondhjem. On April the 15th British and Allied troops

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were landed at several points on the Norwegian coast. Some of these troops were destined to oust the Germans from Narvik, with the assistance of a mixed force; but the main mass were designed for an attack upon Trondhjem. About a division in all, they were divided into two bodies, one at Namsos, under Major-General Carton de Wiart, V.C., and the other under Major-General Paget at Aandalsnes.

There appears to have been an obsession which governed the Allies' conduct of the war for the first eight months at least; it was the fear of risking men or material, and it was natural that this inevitably led to far greater losses than would have occurred by a frank policy of living dangerously. It was this, presumably, that led to the failure to attack Trondhjem from the sea. There was, as has been said, a fort at Agdenes which was of little importance and on the east side of the entrance of the fjord were two batteries of 8-inch guns. There were no shore batteries and no minefields. It seems strange that these bogies scared off the naval attack which would have turned a failure into a success. For there were German warships in the fjord and these, while free to move, could operate as mobile batteries on the flank of a force advancing from Namsos. The road runs along the shore of lake Snaasen and thence to Steinkjer and so on to Levanger. Now the fjord winds its way up to Steinkjer; and almost the whole way of the advance is within range of guns from the fjord. The importance of this is that the operative arm of the Trondhjem force was the Namsos detachment. If it could not move it was useless, and Trondhjem could only be taken by a miracle. The force at Aandalsnes had clearly the role of containing the advance from Oslo. By this time more than a full German division had been landed at Oslo and when the Germans began to

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advance it was at once evident that it was a strong and well-equipped force. The very opposite was true of the Allied force. As soon as the Germans learned of the landing of these troops they set themselves to wreck the bases; and they accomplished it.

In spite of the heroic and most skilful attacks on the aerodromes at Stavanger, Furnebu, and in Denmark the Royal Air Force could not appreciably weaken the German air offensive. There were no quays adequate to dealing with the heavy equipment necessary and what there were, were soon destroyed. The R.A.F. had no base for their fighters to use or the story would have been different. In the result the expedition never had a chance, and the one element of the plan which might have changed the whole outlook was not carried out. It was explained later that the reason was that the Namsos force appeared to be doing so well that it seemed unnecessary. And so it came about that the two territorial battalions advancing from Namsos, while engaged with troops from Trondhjem in front, suddenly found a German destroyer had landed troops with artillery in their rear and had to fall back. A report of this action in rather sensational terms caused a great outcry; but the check, failing naval action in the fjord, was decisive. The naval action, it was learned, had been planned for two days later, April the 25th.

Meanwhile, the Aandalsnes force had been appealed to for help in the Gudbrandsdal valley. The Norwegians who had been holding the Germans at Hamar and Elverum had been compelled to give way and the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, the Yorkshire and Lancashire Regiment and the Green Howards answered the call. The two first, without guns and with no aeroplanes in support, advanced towards Lillehammer, near which place they were attacked



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by a powerful German force with artillery, armoured cars and aeroplanes. For two days they fought a gruelling engagement and then fell back along the valley towards Dombaas, the junction of the Aandsnes and Storen lines. A position had been prepared by the Green Howards covering this junction. They had fallen back in perfect order, making a stand at Kvam and then retiring further when it was clear that the resistance in the Osterdal had broken down. On April the 29th the Germans had passed Roros and begun to cross the mountains towards Ulsberg and Opdal, on the Dombaas-Storen line. With these developments the position of the force at Storen became precarious and the Allied stand before Dombaas not only perilous, but meaningless. The decision, once taken, to abandon the Aandsnes base was promptly carried out and the withdrawal was completed without the loss of a single man. This operation was carried out on May the 1st; and on the following night the evacuation of Namsos was completed without loss. Nothing, it might be said, became the Allies so much as their abandonment of the campaign.

But the Namsos force came under the heaviest of air attacks on its way home; and, as the news of the abandonment and the character of the fighting became known, a storm arose in Britain. When in the following week a two days' debate was held in the House there developed a most bitter personal attack upon Mr Chamberlain. Mr Churchill, who spoke last, warmly replied; but the division was a moral defeat for the Government, since they secured a majority of only 81 out of 481. The debate took place on May the 7th and 8th. Mr Chamberlain attempted to broaden the basis of his Government; but two days later the Germans invaded Holland and Belgium. In this crisis Mr Chamberlain did not delay. That night he broadcast a mes-

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sage informing the nation that he had decided to resign; and Mr Churchill was called upon to form a government.

One of Mr. Chamberlain's lines of defence had been that the Allies did not wish to be drawn into a formidable adventure in the heart of Norway which might have diverted troops that would be badly needed in more important areas. Two days after that debate, with how much more force might he have sustained that contention. Yet the expedition certainly did not show Britain at its best. It seems impossible now that anything could be made of it without the co-operation of a naval attack on Trondhjem fjord. A strongly correlated attack from the sea, from Namsos and from Aandalsnes simultaneously, might have succeeded with even the land force allocated to it, since an aerodrome could have been captured and the British fighters could have dealt with the German 'planes. As it was the Polish and Czech troops and the splendid French Chasseurs Alpains were never engaged except as targets for the German aeroplanes. But the Norwegian operations were not wholly barren of result. British ships sank a number of troopships and supply ships and, at the end, the German Navy had lost between a third and two-fifths of its strength.

## *The Attack on Narvik*

The failure in the south of Norway determined the Allies to make sure at least of Narvik. They had collected there a considerable force of well-trained troops and hard-bitten men from every corner of the world. There were British Guardsmen, there were Chasseurs Alpains, there were men of the Foreign Legion, Poles and Norwegians; and yet it was not until May the 28th that Narvik, with the villages

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on the Rombaks and Bels fjords, fell. The German troops had been given time to dig themselves in and although they were cut off from all assistance, except by aeroplane, they gave an extraordinary demonstration of skill and resolution.

Narvik stands at the head of about fifty miles of winding waters and in its immediate neighbourhood there were four fjords. Herjangs fjord runs north-east, with the small town of Bjerkevik at its head. Rombaks fjord runs due east, washing the bank of the railway line that connects Narvik with Sweden. On the line some five miles east of Narvik is the town of Forneset. Bels fjord runs to the south-east on the other side of the Narvik peninsula, with Fagernes on its coast. Skjommen fjord runs almost due south.

Although the Germans cannot have numbered more than a few thousand, they split into groups and dug themselves in on the fjords. It was for this reason that on May the 13th troops were landed at Bjerkevik. There they were in a position to cut off the German detachment in the Gratangen area, farther north. The landing was a matter of some difficulty and the French troops who carried it out had to storm the snow-covered hills under cover of the guns of the Navy, in face of heavy machine-gun fire from the ruins of the town. The resistance was broken down by an attack by French tanks, after a fierce fight in which German bombers repeatedly attacked the co-operating warships.

A force was now in position for the advance on Narvik from the north; and although the Germans were being continually reinforced by parachutists, the position looked promising. The Germans were, in fact, taking more and more to the mountains and attempting to organize a strong centre of resistance at Bjornefjell near the Swedish frontier, as the Allies closed in on Narvik from north and south. The

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Norwegians were in operation in that area, and on May the 19th they captured a hill near the Bjornefjell station. The Allies were advancing upon the same centre from the west, and a Polish alpine detachment were clearing the north shore of Rombaks fjord. On the 28th the combined movement from the north and south closed in on Narvik and captured it, with Fagernes and Forneset. About 250 Germans were taken prisoners in Narvik.

Mopping-up operations continued some days and the clearing of the railway up to the Swedish frontier was completed.

But it had taken a long time, and it was a barren victory. Narvik was only of use to the Allies when they had sufficient force to conduct their operations comfortably. With the disaster in France and the German occupation of all the Atlantic seaboard of the Continent down to the Spanish frontier, there were more calls on the Navy and better use for the troops. It was therefore with no sense of shock that the news of the withdrawal from Norway was received on June the 11th. The Norwegian campaign presents a bad balance sheet.

## CHAPTER 11

### *A Change of Pilots*

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When May opened Parliament was ambling along with its customary wrangle about the Budget proposals, and there was scarcely a hint of the seething passions that lay beneath the surface. Britain was troubled by the conduct of the campaign in Norway, and M. Reynaud was so disturbed by the French part in it that he proposed to dismiss General Gamelin. M. Daladier's resistance saved the General, and perhaps, when the final accounts are cast up, it will be seen that he may have done so at the cost of his country's downfall.

That consideration did not weigh with France and it was not known in England. All that was known was the story of the rebuff at Steinkjer, which assumed the dimensions of a major defeat, and the report that Trondhjem was almost beyond hope. Still, at that moment, while the facts were in dispute, rumour was to some extent restrained until the afternoon of May the 2nd, when the Prime Minister made a statement in Parliament giving the first official information that the force at Aandalsnes had been withdrawn. It was, he said, 'an interim statement'; but there cannot have been many who failed to understand the implications. There was a tone of explanation, if not apology, about the statement that almost encouraged criticism; but Parliament, on occa-

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sion, can conduct itself with incredible restraint and on that afternoon it was on its best behaviour

A debate was promised for the following week. But in the meantime the news of the evacuation of Namsos had been announced and the country was filled with criticisms of the Government during the week-end, for it was now realized that the southern campaign in Norway had been abandoned, and it looked as if the matter had been completely bungled. Dismay was succeeded by fury. No-one dislikes a rebuff so much as he who has omitted everything that might have prevented it

It was in this mood that Parliament met on Tuesday, May the 7th, to hear the Prime Minister's explanation and debate the Norwegian campaign. Sufficient has already been said about the personality of Mr. Chamberlain. He was never a spell-binder as, on occasion, Mr. Baldwin had proved. He had none of the latter's conciliatoriness or subtlety. Of the one he was incapable and the other he disdained. His speech was, therefore, one of extreme simplicity; the bad points were made baldly and the weak defiantly. The speech clearly laid him open to attack on the broadest front. Yet on this day Parliament was still restrained. If the hitting was hard, it was at least not below the intellect

Mr. Chamberlain described the Norwegian episode in careful detail, and no words can make entirely palatable that unfortunate first attempt to grapple with Germany; but it was his suggestion of a recent change which made Mr. Churchill Chairman of the Military Co-ordinating Committee of the Cabinet with wider powers and a personal staff that appeared to call forth the main opposition.

It was urged that the Cabinet had misled and encouraged everyone to hope that the campaign would be carried to a

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successful conclusion. But the case against the Government was that 'Norway came as the culmination of many other discontents'. Mr. Atlee summed up his point of view in the words: 'we want different people at the helm from those who have led us into the war.' As the debate continued detailed cases of lack of equipment were cited, and the statement of Admiral Sir Roger Keyes that the capture of Trondhjem fjord could have been effected with a few ships caused a sensation. The omission of an attack from the sea had been recognized as a vital defect by all instructed critics, but when an Admiral of the Fleet rose in the House, in full uniform, to endorse the view, the effect was crushing.

Mr. Amery followed and transferred his criticism to the 'whole conduct of the war' and insisted that the 'present methods' would never win the war. All this was, however, shadow boxing. Everyone knew what the passes meant; but they did not strike home.

That complaint, however, could not be made about the second day's debate, which from the first took a more bitter personal note. Mr. Herbert Morrison opened the resumed debate by disclaiming every wish to indulge in personalities. That gambit was sufficiently instructive, and before very long he was quoting criticisms of Mr. Chamberlain from the New York *Herald-Tribune* and the *Sydney Sun*. But this was merely warming up. He was soon making a deliberate, personal attack on members of the Government: 'The fact is that before the war and during the war we have felt that the whole spirit, tempo and temperament of at least some Ministers have been wrong, inadequate and unsuitable. I am bound to refer, in particular to the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Air. I cannot forget that in relation to the conduct of British foreign policy between 1931 and

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1939 they were consistently and persistently wrong.' This, from the gentleman who refused in the critical year of 1936 to support the Government's rearmament programme, was distinctly interesting; but it was not the worst part of Mr. Morrison's speech. He concluded with the statement, the first that anyone had heard of it, that the Opposition intended to press the debate to a division

It was at this point that Mr. Chamberlain made a mistake which, though it can scarcely have influenced the result of the divisions, at least offered points to the Opposition. He appealed to his 'friends in the House' for support against criticism; and that was a fatal piece of folly. Sir Samuel Hoare attempted to divert the discussion into smoother channels by describing some of the exploits of the Royal Air Force; but it was of no avail. Mr Lloyd George, who roused laughter by stating that he intervened 'with more reluctance than usual', was soon tearing the Government's records to shreds. He was subject to some interruption, but only the interposition of his friend Mr. Churchill diverted him from his purpose. Mr Churchill he advised not 'to allow himself to be converted into an air-raid shelter to keep the splinters from hitting his colleagues'; and then he went on to utter the words which made the division an unbridgeable gap. 'I say solemnly that the Prime Minister should give an example of sacrifice, because there is nothing which can contribute more to victory in this war than that he should sacrifice the seals of office.'

After this the tempo of the debate quickened Sir Stafford Cripps, who has an unequalled power of bitter criticism for those whom he does not like, at once stated that 'British officials and members of the American Administration' were 'scathing in their criticism' of the Prime Minister



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and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and he ended by suggesting that the Prime Minister's appeal to his friends will 'show that he is unfit to carry on the government of the country' Mr Duff Cooper, deprecating the 'heat and passion' engendered in the debate, regretted the division of the House but agreed in the main with the criticisms; and so the debate continued until Mr. Alexander wound up with a carefully prepared indictment.

Mr. Churchill in his reply for the Government showed himself at his best. How easy it would have been to have delivered a half-hearted defence of much that must have irked him. He had not been particularly friendly with Mr. Chamberlain. They had had open skirmishes in the House before he entered the Government. Yet he made, as the critics had feared, the most wholehearted and effective defence possible. Towards the end, he even lost his temper at the constant interruptions and complained: 'All day long we have had abuse, and now Hon. Members opposite will not even listen.' But it was significant of his remarkable hold on Parliament and the country—it is a mere irrelevance that his quality deserved it—that no-one thought for a moment that he, though in charge of the department mainly under criticism, was in the least responsible. Even the speech of Sir Roger Keyes, which would have led to the resignation of any other First Lord, did not brush the bloom from his reputation.

But for its prime purpose, the speech was a failure. Whether the insistence upon a division was a failure is not quite so clear. Parliamentarians do not like 'Blitzkrieg' tactics in the House; and the lack of notice that the debate was to be pressed to a division was resented. But as it happened the result of the division was 281 votes for and 200 against the Government, and as 33 Conservative members

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(including Mr. Amery, Mr. Duff Cooper and Brig.-General Spears) voted against the Government with 4 Liberal Nationals and 2 National Labour members, and 65 members (including service members and those unavoidably absent), were unaccounted for it was clear that, in effect, the Prime Minister had received a mortal blow.

That was on May the 8th. On the following day Mr. Chamberlain began to consult his colleagues, and in the evening once more issued an invitation to Labour to join the Government. When Mr. Attlee and Mr. Greenwood arrived, Mr. Chamberlain met them with Lord Halifax and Mr. Churchill. The Labour leaders once again informed Mr. Chamberlain that, though willing to enter the Government, they could not serve under him. They left, however, promising to let him have a considered statement later. But on the next morning, at dawn on Friday, May the 10th, the Germans invaded Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg; and the whole position was changed. Sir Archibald Sinclair, the leader of the Liberal Party, thought that no change should be made in the crisis, but Mr. Chamberlain saw things more justly, and at 6 o'clock that afternoon he had an audience of the King and tendered his resignation. Mr. Churchill was later summoned to the Palace and became Prime Minister.

It is impossible to pass over this episode in a war of such a quality without drawing attention to the injustice of which Mr. Chamberlain was the victim. It is to be admitted that unsuccessful and uncongenial leaders are quite wisely displaced in the general interest. But the real charge against Mr. Chamberlain, apart from a certain intractableness of character, was his attempting to take a 'twenty-to-one' chance of peace and this policy was actually urged by a prominent Left-Wing writer later on, when no-one with

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any vestige of political sense could countenance it (see page 137). Mr. Chamberlain was honourable and straight—too straight, it might be said. He had won his spurs in local administration and he had loyalties which forbade him to throw his friends overboard without the soundest justification.

Of Mr. Churchill much might be said; because he has been and done much. But this was the essential thing, he was known to be absolutely resolute in pressing the war to a victorious conclusion and to be more mobile and responsive in his outlook. It soon appeared that he had a remarkable gift of seizing the essence of the most complicated military situation. A considerable panegyric might be worked up from his *obiter dicta*. These things were scarcely appreciated by the many; but the broad gist of them was apparent to all. His government soon showed that he was the man for the situation. If, in a parliamentary country, it is wise to dismiss an uncongenial leader, it is equally prudent to enlist the services not only of those who are best suited to administer important departments but also of those whose nuisance value is sufficiently high to hold up the machine. Mr. Churchill's government had that appearance. It would probably be called in countries where terms and formulae mean more 'a Government of Concentration'.

The Government was not all announced at once, and it hardly need to be said that parts of it were uncongenial to different sections of the people. The War Cabinet, which inevitably attracted most attention, included Mr. Chamberlain, as Lord President of the Council, Lord Halifax, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Attlee as Lord Privy Seal, and Mr. Greenwood as Minister without Portfolio. This was a skilful disposition of forces, since Mr. Attlee was the leader of the Opposition and Mr. Greenwood had, as

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his deputy, won such wide support that many thought he might well succeed Mr. Attlee. Such people did not know Labour, whose main quality is loyalty. It is on its loyalty to its leaders and unshakable discipline that the Prime Minister based his confidence

Mr. Alexander returned to his old department, the Admiralty, where he had won golden opinions from his staff. It was not only a popular, it was a good appointment. Sir Archibald Sinclair, the leader of the Liberal Opposition, became Secretary of State for the Air. His was a reputation to make but he had been a subaltern under Mr. Churchill when he was in the Army; and he could be trusted to administer the Air department. For the really important new department of Aircraft Production Lord Beaverbrook was selected. It was a difficult position to fill, but Lord Beaverbrook plunged into the work with such vigour that his first day was one of eighteen hours' continuous labour. Lord Beaverbrook had been what is called in the United States an 'isolationist'; but now he was to be associated with two Labour men in the main work of preparing the war machine. Mr. Herbert Morrison, whose attitude towards rearmament, in the crucial year of 1936, has already been remarked, was now created Minister of Supply, a sort of poetic justice, though no-one seemed to notice it, to build up those armaments which, in 1936, might have given Britain peace and security. He had a great reputation in Labour as the organizer of the campaign which brought his party victory in the London County Council; but on the larger platform he was a new man.

The most provocative appointment was the third of the triumvirate which had the task of rearming Britain. Mr. Bevin, who was not even a Member of Parliament, was given the Ministry of Labour. He and Mr. Morrison had

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the full confidence of Labour and if anyone could do the colossal work which was thrust upon them it was they. Mr. Bevin was the head of the great Transport union, a man who had fought as vigorously as responsibly for the welfare of his union. These men achieved success almost at once, not merely because they were more vigorous, resolute or capable administrators but because the trade unions would accept from them demands which they would not tolerate from any non-Labour leader

Mr. Hugh Dalton was another Labour member taken into the Government. He was given control of the department for Economic Warfare. He is one of the intellectuals of the party and belongs to the public school section of Labour. Mr. Amery became Secretary of State for India and Burma, a sound appointment of the conventional type. Sir John Reith, after a very short reign at the Ministry of Information, went to the Ministry of Transport, and Mr. Duff Cooper reigned in his stead. Very quickly he proved himself to have a surer insight into the needs of the department. Mr. Ernest Brown, who had long sat for a Scottish constituency, became Secretary of State for Scotland, not without some complaint on the part of the Scots.

It was clear at the moment, and it became clearer later, that there were a number of Ministers who were unacceptable to the Labour and Liberal Parties. The disposal of these was skilfully contrived. Sir Samuel Hoare went as Extraordinary Ambassador to Spain (and to placate the opposite view Sir Stafford Cripps went in the same role to Soviet Russia). Sir John Simon was given the coveted Woolsack and a viscounty. The last of the most unpopular, Sir Kingsley Wood, succeeded Sir John Simon at the Treasury. The most unpopular of all, Mr. Neville Chamberlain, was retained in the War Cabinet. Mr. Churchill was wise

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to retain these Conservatives in his Cabinet in spite of their unpopularity with certain sections of the people, and he gave immense reassurance to the country in refusing to follow the worked-up outcry against them.

With a wide distribution of minor posts Mr. Churchill filled out a Cabinet which, all things considered, was as promising as any could be. It had to represent all shades of opinion if it was to secure full national unity and, in fact, by seeming to effect the former it achieved the latter. It was none too soon in setting the country to work, since Mr. Churchill had to shoulder the responsibility for a situation which, threatening on the day he went to 10 Downing Street, rapidly deteriorated to the very verge of disaster. How well might he have complained that of all the Government he had the least responsibility for the crisis he was called upon to face. Instead, he set himself to pilot the historic craft of Britain through the threatening seas to victory.

## CHAPTER 12

### *The Battle of the Frontiers*

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#### *1. From Peace to War*

**T**he German forces crossed the frontiers of Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg before dawn on May the 10th, without warning. It was at 6 o'clock, two hours after the first aeroplanes had appeared over Rotterdam, that the German Minister at The Hague delivered his ultimatum to the Foreign Minister warning him that 'any resistance is useless. Germany guarantees that, if no resistance is offered, Holland will retain her possessions in Europe and overseas. If resistance is offered there is the danger of the complete destruction of the country and of the machinery of state.' The German Government could not be content with this; they had to insist that the invasion was justified. 'We have undeniable proofs of an immediately imminent invasion by France and Britain of Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. This invasion has been long prepared with the knowledge of Holland and Belgium with the object of attacking the Ruhr district.'

On this occasion the lie was particularly clumsy as it was known that General Gamelin, for strategic reasons, did not wish to leave his defensive lines; and the Foreign Minister retorted that the Government indignantly rejected the sup-

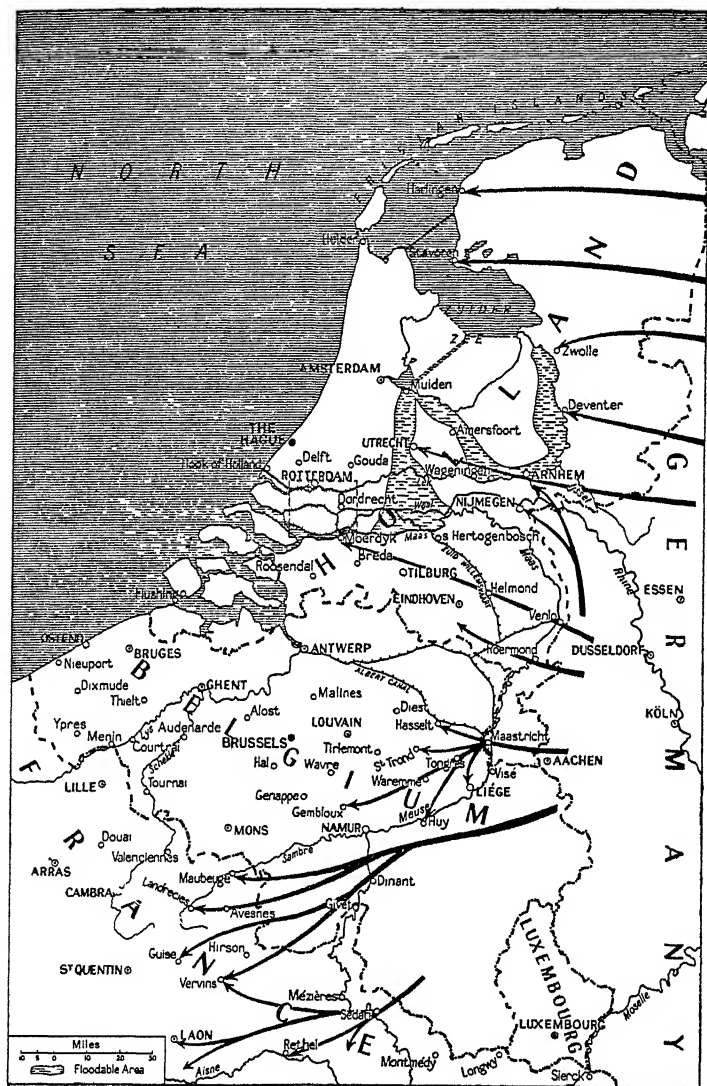
## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

position that they would have concluded any hostile agreement with any Power against Germany and that, owing to this unprecedented attack Holland was now at war with Germany.

The Queen later on issued a Proclamation calling the country to arms: 'After our country, with scrupulous conscientiousness, had observed strict neutrality during all these months, and while Holland had no other design than to maintain this attitude, Germany last night made a sudden attack on our territory without warning. This was done in spite of a solemn promise that the neutrality of our country would be respected as long as we maintained it ourselves. I here launch a flaming protest against this unprecedented violation of good faith and the violation of all that is decent between cultured States. I and my Government will now do our duty Do your duty everywhere and in all circumstances. . . .'

It was the sound of the Brussels anti-aircraft guns in action against the German aeroplanes that first announced to Belgium that Germany was once more breaking her promise to respect its neutrality. The Cabinet was in session soon after midnight, since they had heard some hours before that the German troops who had been standing in force across the frontier for nearly six months were in motion; and soon after 4 a.m. they learned that Holland was being invaded. Not many minutes later the German aeroplanes appeared over Brussels and all doubt of the direction of the German Army's march was at an end. But it was not until 8.30 that the German Ambassador asked for an interview with M. Spaak, the Belgian Foreign Minister. Fighting had now been in progress for several hours; and, accordingly, M. Spaak anticipated the statement of the German Ambassador, and scornfully denounced to him Germany's





5. The frontiers in the west

## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

new act of aggression without any sort of justification.

When he described the incident in the Chamber that afternoon M. Spaak stated that King Leopold had taken over the supreme direction of the operations and that the Government, after ordering general mobilization, had appealed to Great Britain and France to come to their assistance and had received a favourable reply within thirty minutes.

The Luxembourg Government crossed into Belgium during the morning, taking with them the archives and gold reserve.

So the board was set for the great adventure; and at first, fortune being true to its preference for a daring wooer, all went well for Germany

### *2. The Pretext and the Plan*

The pretext for the invasion was put more crudely and harshly by Herr von Ribbentrop to the Netherlands Minister in Berlin. There was, said Hitler's Foreign Minister, a secret understanding between the Low Countries and the Allies. The calamity of the situation was that there was not a vestige of truth in the German contention. If the Low Countries had only been less scrupulous and more self-interested the history of the next few months might have been entirely different. Both of them were so scrupulous in the observance of their neutrality that they would not hear of staff consultations with the Allies, and as a consequence there could be no concerted plan for defence. Even if the Allies had ever seriously considered anticipating the German invasion there might have been better chance of suc-

## *The Pretext and the Plan*

cess. But the French Commander-in-Chief was actually against intervention, a standpoint which had its strategical justification, but was politically impossible.

The pretext then was a lie. The reason for the invasion was the development of Hitler's plan, which, incredible at first, carried conviction as one piece after another fell into place. The earlier Schlieffen plan involved the attempt to envelop the Allied armies by a vast flank march through Holland and Belgium, pivoting on the Luxembourg frontier. Moltke had adapted it in 1914 by omitting the Dutch part of the plan. But there were more robust consciences at the service of Germany in 1940. Moltke had feared the increased outcry which the invasion of Holland would have involved. But for Hitler that was almost an end in itself. He had said that the great lie had the better chance of success and he realized that the great crime earns little more repudiation while it increases the terror and impression of power.

There were additional reasons for not abandoning even a pawn in this new attack. The Maginot Line was a more powerful bastion than the fortified frontier zone of August 1914; and to put the Allied armies *bors de combat* would need an advance with greater momentum. Furthermore, Holland and Belgium had uses that deeply appealed to Hitler. He recognized that at long last the centre and pivot of the alliance, and of opposition to the realization of his plans in Europe, was Britain. The French Army was reputed to be the finest in the world; but the French, unlike the Germans, thought they could not secure the victory in open warfare. This was the reason for the Maginot Line and its continuation to the sea; this was the reason for Gamelin's reluctance to enter Belgium. The Allied prescription for victory involved a longer or shorter period in

## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

which the French, with the help of a small Expeditionary Force, could parry the German thrust while the British trained an army of millions and amassed every kind of weapon for the final clash

Hitler had no intention of allowing the Allies to cut down his vital supplies in all directions while they accumulated the requisite force to destroy him, and the one way to carry out this plan was to secure the means to attack Britain directly. The German air and sea bases were too distant for effective use; but from Holland, Belgium and northern France he could employ his ships and aeroplanes to the best advantage. Already it had been made clear that the German bomber had little chance against the British fighter and, since fighters have speed and not range, the distances were too great for the adoption of fighter escorts. From northern France, Belgium and Holland German fighters could be sent to accompany the bombers in their raids on ports and shipping; and there would be a chance to try out the possibility of dispersing convoys and thereby initiating a counter-blockade. Even if it should prove impossible to starve Britain out, the effect of constant raids combined with sufficient success against shipping to cause greater stringency in rationing might weaken her resolution; and the best conditions for carrying out an invasion would be secured.

Holland and Belgium, therefore, counted in Hitler's plan as admirable approaches to the heart of his main enemy's strength; and they filled another role. The Allied blockade was injuring Germany. Through the invasion of Denmark he had secured fresh stores of food; but they were largely wasting assets and as Germany had been living on guns instead of butter for some years there was an immense shortage to make good. Holland, however, produces many

## *The Defences*

of those things that Germany needed so much: cattle, pigs, sheep, potatoes, oats, rye, wheat, barley, beans, peas, and dairy produce. Belgium, though dependent upon foreign supplies for its food, is a manufacturing country and is rich in minerals: coal, iron, zinc, lead and copper

In both cases then, the occupation of the country provided commodities which Germany badly needed. Add to this the fact that each of them was possessed of a colonial empire of considerable value. The Dutch Empire was not only singularly rich in products such as rubber, in which Germany was deficient, but was also situated strategically in the most desirable part of the East for a nation aspiring to world power. Holland and Belgium were both among the smaller countries of Europe with busy, industrious peoples, proud of their history and position and desiring nothing more than to be left in their modest comfort.

### *3. The Defences*

The long frontier line of Holland and Belgium was only defended by light defences throughout its length, except in the middle sector where the Maas follows the international boundary for some distance. There it forms the main Dutch defensive line. The French frontier of Luxembourg was defended by the Maginot Line; but Belgian Luxembourg, the country which lies east of the Meuse, is the Ardennes country, a plateau which is cut by few straight or level roads, and is heavily wooded. Over the greater part of the frontier with France the country is flat. This frontier was defended by a line of fortifications continuing the Maginot Line. The fortified works were also all on the ground level, so sited as to have a long range of fire. They were

## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

linked by underground telephones to the observation posts. Both forts and observation posts were skilfully camouflaged and in some cases they were surrounded by ditches and waterlogged ground. In this way the builders put to good use the water they encountered in the underground water-courses. There was skilful entrenching, tank guards and much wire. Though it became the fashion later on to speak of this sector of the line as if, being merely a continuation of the Maginot Line, it was practically worthless, it embodied, in fact, the best ideas of the defensive in the Great War. Skilfully and resolutely manned, it had all the elements of a scientific defensive in depth.

As regards the Dutch and Belgian frontiers there was only one sector upon which the defence could not afford to give way and did not intend to give way considerably. That sector was the southern course of the Maas from a point opposite Nijmegen. But if the troops gave way in the southern of these areas, they allowed the Germans to concentrate there against the French frontier defensive line. It was intractable, broken, wooded ground; but how often in history has such inhospitable country given the enemy his chance.

The Belgian main line of defence was the gorge-like Meuse, which dips through the salient which French territory pushes into Belgium, where it runs south and east, carrying Sedan on its right bank.

### *4. The Course of the Battle*

There was a chance that the richer and most strategically valuable part of Holland might be held even if the main defences everywhere could not be maintained until the Allies were fully in position; but by the novelty of their

## *The Dutch Theatre*

attack the Germans completely turned the defensive system and compelled the Dutch to surrender in five days. In this time the Belgian frontier had also been breached and on the day that Holland capitulated the French frontier was pierced and the whole Allied position in the west was in solution. In Holland and France the success was mainly due to strategical surprise. In Belgium it appears to have been due to an accident or oversight which even conspicuous heroism could not redeem. By the evening of May the 14th, then, Holland (except Zeeland) had surrendered, the Maginot Line was turned, and the Allied forces in Belgium were threatened with envelopment. In five days of terror, confusion and brutal force the German juggernaut had swept over the modest hopes of hundreds of thousands of people and was on its way to crush mighty France.

### *5. The Dutch Theatre*

A glance at the map of Holland will suggest at once the incongruity of such a country in any but a system of law and order. Its population is under nine million and its area nearly 13,000 square miles. With a population and area about double that of Yorkshire, it has a huge sea and land frontier with hardly any part of it covered by natural defensive features. The north-eastern provinces of Groningen, Friesland, Drenthe and Overijssel are flat and practically defenceless. The province of Dutch Limburg, the Maas-tricht or Limburg appendix, at the southern extremity of the country is defenceless until the line of the Maas is reached, i.e. the province is practically entirely defenceless. Holland is a rich, hard-working and flourishing country; but it could not have built a Maginot Line to protect its

## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

land frontiers, and if it had, the long, deeply cut coast offered numerous opportunities for turning the line from the sea.

The problem for an invader was not to conquer Holland, but to effect the conquest in a few days. For the Dutch the problem of defence had been faced resolutely. A line of light fortifications ran south as far as the Rhine; but it was not expected to do more than delay somewhat the advance from the east. A definite line of defence followed the rivers Ijssel and Maas from near Zwolle to Maastricht. The hinterland of the Ijssel could be flooded and the defensive positions, including concrete emplacements, were difficult of approach if the inundations had been carried out. The bridges throughout the river line were mined. West of the Ijssel there was the line of the Grebbe, a defensive line running from Amersfoort to Wageningen. This line covered Utrecht, which, in fact, lay in the centre of the main defensive line, the stretch of country which could be inundated between Muiden and the Maas. Industrial and commercial Holland was covered by this line and, if the inundation could be fully carried out, it was held to be impregnable, since once the water was allowed to soak into the ground neither tanks nor cavalry could cross it.

The Waal, Maas and Hollandsch Diep turn this part of Holland, 'fortress' Holland, into an island. The southern bank of the Hollandsch Diep and the left bank of the Maas could be flooded.

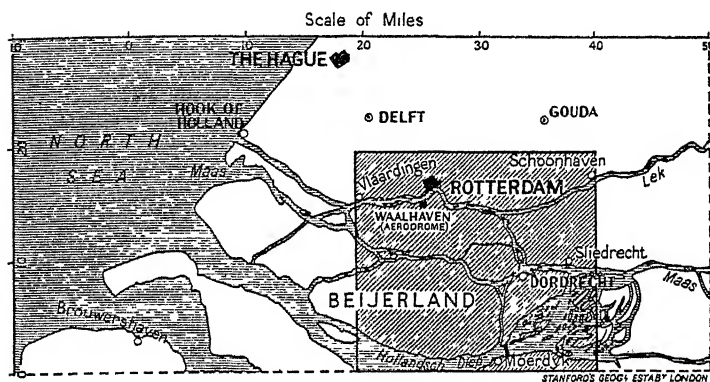
The line of the Maas is the main defensive line of the province of North Brabant which lies south of 'fortress' Holland; but unless its northern course can be held the way is open to a penetration to the coast about the Maas delta and the province of Zeeland.

The first alarm about the invasion of Holland had come



## *The Dutch Theatre*

in November. For some time before it had been appreciated that the main German force was concentrated on the frontiers of Luxembourg, Belgium and Holland. So notorious was this that the King of the Belgians visited Queen Wilhelmina on November the 6th and the two sovereigns sent a telegram to the King, President Lebrun and Herr Hitler



6 *The area which, in the rear of the main Dutch defensive line, was invaded by parachutists and troops carried by aeroplane*

offering 'their good offices with the object of facilitating peace negotiations'; but the appeal came to nothing and Belgium and Holland began to overhaul their defences. It seems that an attack was actually designed for November the 11th, but it was countermanded; and, when it actually broke out in May, it came as a surprise.

The weak point of the Dutch defences was the Limburg 'appendix' where the Maas could be more easily crossed. No attempt was made to defend the province itself and, in fact, the Maas was crossed far too easily. But the German

## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

strategy was much subtler than is implied by the mere crossing of the Maas, though this was the gateway into North Brabant. Realizing the strength of the main Dutch defences the Germans designed to strike in their rear and to seize from the first moment of the offensive a strong foothold in the very heart of 'fortress' Holland. The one obvious way in which this could be done was by invasion from the North Sea. That, however, was ruled out by the supremacy of the Allied sea power.

A second way, which entered into few minds until then, was from the air. Yet the Germans actually accomplished this almost incredible feat; and, from the first day, they held an area about Rotterdam until they were able to send an armoured column across North Brabant to link up with it, and all was over. The area frequently changed its shape. Sometimes the Germans were dispossessed of one of the points they had seized in the centre or on the circumference; but the picked men who had landed in it never wholly relaxed their hold. Their presence there, even when it seemed to turn the main defences, was always an immense and confusing preoccupation.

They might not have caused such dismay and confusion if they had not been able to count upon effective support from treacherous elements in the very centre of the island. But with the assistance of such treachery and the continuous exploitation of invasion from the air the Dutch commander was always compelled to give battle on a number of 'fronts, to dissipate his attention, to distribute his forces; and, when the thrust came towards Utrecht, the centre of the flooded area, he had no adequate force to meet it. He never had even a remote chance of meeting the threat from the air on equal terms. How could a country of the size of Holland muster even a formidable proportion of the German air

## *The Dutch Theatre*

force which outnumbered the Allied air forces, at that time, by almost three to one?

The Dutch Army could not muster more than 450 aeroplanes and, though some of them were of the most modern type, they represented no sufficient defence against the numbers which were sent against them. The mobilized strength of about 400,000 men was similarly insufficient to hold a frontier which amounted, with its many re-entrants, to about 300 miles. The Navy which had to play its part consisted of six cruisers, a coast defence ship, sixteen destroyers, twenty-one submarines and several small auxiliary vessels; but its main role was to protect the Netherlands imperial possessions. Even the IJssel and Maas line must have been little short of 200 miles in extent, and though bridges were for the most part blown up, the Germans travelled with a most elaborate engineering train that won the technical appreciation of the Allies. They were provided with equipment for making bridges in sections, on a principle similar to that of Meccano, so that every breakdown was repaired with the utmost speed.

The first onslaught, in the early morning of Friday, May the 10th took the form of a skilful selective attack from the air. Two German aeroplanes were brought down at Vlaardingen about midway between the Hook of Holland and Rotterdam. Two others were destroyed in an attack on Delft, about midway between the Hague and Rotterdam, and another two were brought down near the Waalhaven aerodrome, the Rotterdam airport, south of the Maas. About 5 a.m. a number of Dornier flying boats came down on the Maas, in the heart of Rotterdam, and quickly disembarked troops, who seized the road and railway bridges. About the same time Waalhaven aerodrome was seized by parachutists, who were soon reinforced by

## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

troops from other aeroplanes. Two Junkers carrying parachutists were brought down in the centre of The Hague, and all were killed.

By the afternoon not only were German troops in possession of Waalhaven aerodrome and the south bank of the river, but they were even holding positions on the northern bank. They were also established at Dordrecht and in some buildings at Delft. Waalhaven aerodrome changed hands several times; but in the evening it was in German hands and, although a Dutch destroyer, the *von Galen*, tried to shell out the Germans from the northern bank, it merely drove them to cover.

All these places lie in a comparatively small area about Rotterdam, in the heart of 'fortress' Holland. Dutch aerodromes all over the country were attacked from the air and nearly seventy troop-carrying planes were counted. General Winkelman, the Commander-in-Chief, therefore found himself at the end of the first day with the enemy installed in the rear of his main, his final line of defence. In spite of his brave words, that night the Dutch position was undermined. Moreover by means of parachutists and Germans in Dutch uniforms landed from barges the Moerdyk bridges, which connected South Holland with North Brabant, were also captured. There were already evident signs of treachery from within. Germans living on the outskirts of the Hague attempted to seize the police headquarters, and the Dutch troops and police who beat them off were fired at from houses in the city.

On the next day the air attack was continued with even greater intensity. Parachutists landed at Wassenaar, Schoonhoven, Dordrecht, Slidrecht, Gouda, Boxtel, Brouwershaven, Suesterberg, Eindhoven and Breda; and, again, the main concentration was in the rear of the last defensive

## *The Dutch Theatre*

line. The troops who held the Waalhaven aerodrome were compelled to evacuate it by a prolonged and most skilful attack delivered by the Royal Air Force; but it was soon reoccupied, and there cannot be any doubt that this hold on the heart of the richest part of Holland had a decisive influence upon the operations. On the fourth day of the campaign the Germans crossed the Zuid Willems canal, west of the Maas and established contact with this scattered force landed by aeroplane, and an armoured column reached the Moerdyk bridge, linked up with the small force in possession, and crossed the Hollandsch Diep and reached Rotterdam. The Dutch position was then near to dissolution, although on that very day the command was announcing that the parachute attacks had been mastered.

By this time the position had critically deteriorated everywhere. On the long frontier of the four northern provinces of Holland the outposts had fought bravely against a heavy attack, and after losing some 6,000 prisoners had fallen back to the line of the Ijssel and Maas. Maastricht had been lost on that sad Friday and this was to have its vital repercussion upon the Belgian campaign, since it lies near the Albert Canal, which was part of the main defensive line of Belgium. On the same day four German armoured trains had been blown up, one of them at Venloo on the Maas, on the eastern edge of the Peel Marsh. As the outposts fell back they destroyed bridges and left obstacles and land mines in their wake. But at Arnhem, through some oversight, the bridge across the Ijssel was not destroyed and the Germans were astride the road and railway to Utrecht.

Two days later the four northern provinces were occupied and the Germans reached Harlingen and the eastern

## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

shores of the Zuyder Zee. This movement had been anticipated; and, on the first appearance of German troops at Stavoren on Saturday, the Dutch gunboats *Friso*, *Brinio*, *Gruno* and *Nassau* were sent to shell the position. It was feared that the Germans intended to cross the Zuyder Zee into the province of North Holland and this would have meant that the centre of the Dutch position would be attacked from the north as well as from the south and east. In the bombardment the *Gruno* and the *Nassau* were sunk by a German aeroplane; but the attempt to cross the Zuyder Zee was not renewed.

The German Navy made no appearance during the whole of the campaign. The British Navy had intervened effectively to prevent the arrival of that unwelcome guest. One of the first operations they carried out on the outbreak of the war was to lay a great minefield across the German line of approach. Destroyers kept the ports of Ijmuiden, the Hook and Flushing open; and motor torpedo-boats sailed through the canal at Ijmuiden into the Zuyder Zee and attacked the Germans on the east, and southern shores. The destroyer *Valentin* was so badly damaged from the air that it became a total loss. Marines were landed at the Hook and with other troops fought until the position was hopeless.

The British sailors then carried out other and less pleasant though equally valuable duties. They assisted in destroying everything that could be of use to the enemy. Oil stores, locks, and quayside machinery were destroyed; canals and the fairways of ports were blocked. Warships on the stocks were destroyed and one large cruiser near completion was towed across the North Sea followed by the bulk of the Dutch fleet in home waters.

On the fourth day, May the 13th, the position was, as we

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have seen, almost lost, but it was not beyond redemption. With the road across North Brabant open and the main road and railway connection between it and 'fortress' Holland in German hands, the final defensive line was lost. On the next day, the 14th, the line of the Grebbe between Amersfoort and the Waal was pierced. It will be noticed that the troops on this sector had fought with courage and discipline. The unfortunate lapse at Arnhem had made the IJssel line untenable; but the retreat to the Grebbe line was carried out in order, and the position had been held for several days. With the breach in it the Germans at once pressed on towards Utrecht.

The Dutch position was now past hope. An armoured column had linked up with the Germans at Rotterdam the day before, and on this day Roosendaal in the extreme west of North Brabant was occupied. Parachutists were landing at Amsterdam. IJmuiden was being repeatedly bombed. Rotterdam, the ancient and historic city, with its six hundred thousand inhabitants, was ruthlessly, relentlessly, thoroughly bombed. 'The destruction of Rotterdam,' said the *National Zeitung* a month later, took twenty minutes. In a terrible war this crime stands out as unpardonable. The other centres of population were threatened with a similar destruction. In sum, the main defences were threatened from the north rear, they were under heavy pressure in the centre, they were completely turned from the south, and Germany, a little behind on its time-table, was prepared to go to all lengths.

That night the Commander-in-Chief surrendered, and the capitulation of the army was signed at 11 o'clock on the morning of the 15th by both Commanders. The announcement issued from the Netherlands Legation in London stated. 'Enemy troops in great numbers have succeeded in

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crossing the Moerdyk bridge and in retaking Rotterdam, which had previously been heavily bombed.

‘Consequently the heart of the country was laid open to the enemy and the main forces of the army behind the Dutch waterline were threatened by immediate enemy attacks on their rear

‘Under these circumstances and in order to avoid complete destruction of the country, the Commander-in-Chief was of the opinion that further resistance had become useless and therefore was to be abandoned.’

This announcement pays the highest possible tribute to the German strategy, for it will be remembered that from the very beginning the enemy seized a footing in the rear of the Dutch waterline. He was never completely ejected. With the forces at the Dutch Commander’s disposal, and the possibility of treachery everywhere, it is difficult to see how he could have done better. It was only the courage and steadiness of the troops that held the enemy at bay for five days.

In his broadcast to the nation General Winkelman said that ‘the war was completely one-sided’ and the soldiers’ courage was no match for the ‘technical methods of the enemy’, who had ‘a vast superiority of the most modern arms’ The internal combustion engine, in fact, was still winning its victories. It had overcome Poland and Norway. It was yet to destroy one of the greatest military nations in the world.

The statement issued by the Netherlands Legation in London made it clear that ‘the state of war between the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Germany continues to exist’; and the Commander-in-Chief announced that ‘The fight in Zeeland is still continuing’. In the group of islands which comprise the province of Zeeland the Dutch Rear-



## *The Dutch Theatre*

Admiral van der Stad with naval and military detachments, assisted by French Marines and soldiers about a division in strength, and with the help of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force held out a little longer until they were compelled to fall back across the frontier.

The Dutch casualties were certainly heavy, but some of the estimates given are meaningless. One guess is 200,000 which would mean that in five days' fighting the casualties had been one in two of the force engaged. Another suggestion, sprung from evident dissatisfaction with the first, is one in four. If the term casualty is taken to cover prisoners as well as killed and wounded the guess may have some meaning, but it would suggest, what is quite possibly the case, that the army had fallen to pieces and lost very heavily in prisoners indeed. But, however regrettable such a state of things is, and however much it involves defeat, it is not, happily, so disastrous as would be an equal number of dead and wounded.

The Queen of the Netherlands had suffered the fate of the King of Norway. Repeated attempts were made to capture her and when she was persuaded to leave the Hague the place to which she was to retire was at once bombed. It is difficult to understand where the ramifications of treachery ended. The parachutists were frequently found to be wearing false uniforms, even British. Some were dressed as clergymen, some as women. These invaders were frequently found to be provided with lists of names of sympathizers; and it seems impossible to evade the conclusion that when the Dutch Command, at times, thought they had been wiped out, they had gone to friendly cover.

When it was seen that the Queen was in real danger of capture she was prevailed upon to leave the country. On the morning of the fourth day of the campaign, the 13th, the

## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

senior officer of the British destroyer flotilla at The Hague was informed that the Queen was at the quayside and wished to enter his ship. He went to meet Her Majesty and was asked to take her to Flushing. Instead it was found better to take her to England. Princess Juliana and her children also left for England and later went to Canada. A few days after her arrival in England Queen Wilhelmina made a declaration in which she said:

‘I will speak only of the reasons that finally moved me to decide as I did. For there were cold and weighty reasons militating against the natural sentiment that prompted me and my family to stay and suffer what my unhappy people were called upon to suffer.

‘Plans found on the invader on the first day of this wanton assault, confirmed by the action of his air-borne troops, soon made it clear that his first objective was to capture the Royal family and the Government, thus to paralyse the country by depriving it of all leadership and legally constituted authority.’

Standards of warfare have deteriorated so much in the hands of Hitler’s armies that perhaps that particular instance of German brutality will not gravely shock anyone to-day. But it has its complete relevance to the central theme of this story. The Queen ended her declaration with the words:

‘To remain true to the motto of the House of Orange, of Holland, of all that immense part of the world that is fighting for what is infinitely more precious than life, *je maintiendrai*—“I shall maintain” ’ Or as one might have said more colloquially. ‘I shall see it through ’

## *The Belgian Defences*

### *7. The Belgian Defences*

Belgium is slightly smaller than Holland, but the density of the population is almost the same in both countries. Holland had escaped invasion in 1914, but Belgium had been true to its tradition as the 'cockpit of Europe'; and that experience had led it to take more elaborate precautions for self-defence. Unlike Holland, Belgium had, up to 1914, a formal neutrality imposed by the Treaty of London. The Treaty of Versailles released her from that condition, she concerted her defence with the French General Staff and was a partner in the Locarno Treaties. When, however, in March 1936, Germany denounced the Locarno Pact and sent her troops into the Rhineland, Belgium changed her foreign policy, announced an actual neutrality and, while retaining her membership of the League of Nations, reserved the right to permit the transit of forces through her territory according to her decision in the particular case.

The new position was accepted by a joint communication of the British and French Ambassadors to the Belgian Foreign Minister which renewed the pledge of assistance in case of aggression. This was in April 1937; and, in the following October, Germany also renewed her pledge to respect the inviolability and integrity of Belgium, unless she took part in military operations against Germany, and pledged her assistance in case of attack. The change in Belgian status was occasioned by the German denunciation of the Locarno Pact; but it was conditioned by Fleming's distrust of France, the fear of being drawn into French quarrels and dislike of the Franco-Russian alliance.

From these events sprang a new scheme of military defence, and at the outbreak of war Belgium had a much better-equipped army and a more elaborate defence system

## *The Battle of the Frontiers*

than in 1914. Her mobilized strength was about 600,000 men organized in 22 infantry divisions, 2 cavalry divisions and 1 armoured brigade. The Chief of Staff was General Michiels; but on the outbreak of war the King assumed the position of Commander-in-Chief. The army was then grouped in seven army corps, the chief of which were the 1st, commanded by General van der Veken in the Maas-tricht district; 3rd, commanded by General de Krahe about the Liège fortified positions; 5th, commanded by General van der Bergen, Antwerp district; 6th, commanded by General Verstraten, Ghent district; 7th, commanded by General Deffontaine, Namur positions

The Cavalry Corps was commanded by General de Neve de Roden and was based on Hasselt. There was the Groupe Chardonne at Tournai on the French frontier, since the Belgian Government had, theoretically, to make provision for the defence of that frontier. The air operations were in charge of General Duvivier, with General Hiernaux in command of the Air Force and General Frère controlling the anti-aircraft defence.

It was a modern army with full technical equipment and it had been mobilized in stages, from the preceding August, so that the operation could proceed smoothly and time would be provided for training. The first stages was the mobilization of the Air Force and anti-aircraft units which took place on the 25th of August 1939; and then followed the regular troops on the eastern frontier (August the 28th). Three corps were brought to full strength and watching posts were taken up as far as Maeseyck, at the neck of the Limburg appendix (September the 1st). Instead of the next stage men were called up fortnightly for instructional periods. In April were called up the Territorial troops, older men, more like the French than the

## *The Belgian Defences*

British Territorials. The last stage was carried out on the outbreak of war, when the Civil servants and the remaining troops were mobilized.

It was through spreading the mobilization over nine months instead of attempting to accomplish it more swiftly that the Belgians avoided the blocking that had occurred on the Dutch railways. In April all the ports were mined as a precaution and all the bridges were prepared for destruction.

The defences were designed to cover the manning of the main defensive line and to provide subsidiary positions for resistance in case this was pierced. Along the frontier of Luxembourg from near Longwy through Houffalize and Malmédy there was a series of positions; and about eight to ten miles behind the southern end was a further line through Virton, Neufchâteau and Saint-Hubert. But the groups which held these advanced positions were merely to act as outposts and, having destroyed the positions, to fall back. The roads were blocked, there were tank traps and anti-tank obstacles and a widely scattered system of land mines, in the midst of which a patient peasantry, steeped in a tradition of warfare, went on with its husbandry under the eye of patrols who warned them when they approached the land mines too closely.

The main defensive line ran along the Meuse with its great fortresses of Namur, Liège and Eben Emael. The Meuse is, through much of its Belgian course, a gorge-like river, and if all the bridges had been destroyed it should have held up for some time even an advance pressed with such persistence as that of the Germans. Just south of Maastricht, the Dutch town which lies on the left bank of the Maas, the Albert Canal leaves the neighbourhood of the river and flows north close to the frontier before turn-

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ing west to Antwerp. In this short northern stretch there are two crossings carrying roads from Maastricht. The more northerly is Veldwezelt and the southern Vroenhoven. From Maastricht, which the Romans knew as the *Traiectus superior*, the upper ford, via the Vroenhoven bridge, runs the road to Tongres, a point which the world knew almost as soon as the German offensive opened. There were fortified casements along the Albert Canal about every 500 yards

There were further lines of defence, mostly river lines, the most famous being the Antwerp-Namur line, via Louvain and Wavre. This was a strong line, the first sector being a deep defensive of pill-boxes, one behind the other, with anti-tank defences in advance of it.

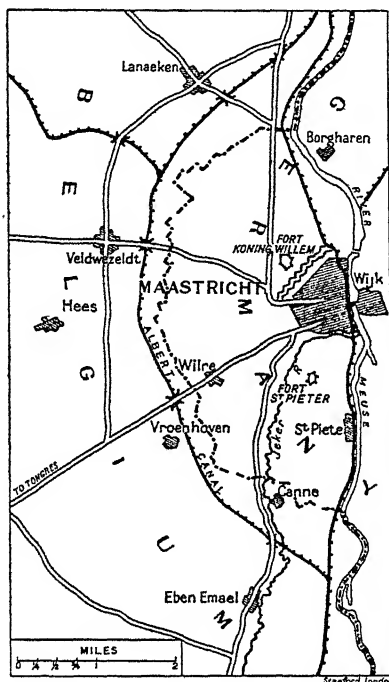
### *8. The Attack*

The Dutch defensive differed so much in character from that of Belgium that the weakness of the two countries in face of attack was the inevitable lack of coherence in the defence. The scrupulous neutrality which both countries adopted involved the arrangement of defensive systems separately instead of jointly. As a consequence the northern course of the Maas in the Limburg appendix was held by Belgian troops within Belgian territory, and the Albert Canal which lay below the Dutch southern frontier was part of this main defensive line. The strategic weakness of the two countries was that under pressure the armies must retreat upon divergent lines.

Unhappily for Belgium and for the Allies, the northern course of the Meuse with its ford at Maastricht was in Dutch territory; and yet from Maastricht ran the roads to

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the Albert Canal, pointing to the rear of the whole Belgian defensive system. Moreover, the canal along this short stretch stands about 110 yards above the sea level and from



7. *Maastricht, the Meuse, and the bridges of the Albert Canal*

the lower ground on the opposite side of the frontier offers a conspicuous mark. On the Dutch side, also, there are numbers of houses and it was obvious that artillery could be concealed there to destroy any defensive posts about the canal bridges. The new fort Eben Emael, one of the most modern and powerful in the whole Belgian defensive posi-

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tion, lay close by and standing about 27 yards higher than the surrounding country on a dominating cliff, it appeared to offer the best gauge that the canal with its valuable bridges would remain inviolate.

Maastricht was captured on the first day of the offensive and the Germans at once advanced along the roads to the Belgian frontier. The following day, Saturday, they were able to cross the Albert Canal by means of the two bridges at Veldwezeldt and Vroenhoven. Apparently the dugout which sheltered the officer who was charged with the destruction of these two bridges was heavily bombed from the air and he was killed as he attempted to operate the electrically charged mines. Another officer, however, was able to penetrate to the mine chamber. He succeeded in blowing up the Veldwezeldt bridge and himself with it. But already the German armoured columns had crossed and spread out towards Hasselt and Tongres. The Vroenhoven bridge was the more important as it carried the Tongres road; and this bridge remained open until it was destroyed by the Royal Air Force. But by that time the damage had been done. Fort Eben Emael, which should have controlled the issue from the bridges, was itself captured. Parachutists landed from gliders noiselessly on the flat roof of the fort; and the defences could not cope with this novel form of attack. The 7th Belgian division of the 1st Corps were holding this fortified position; but they found themselves hustled and suddenly almost surrounded by the rush of the German advanced column. Thus, by the afternoon of the second day of the offensive, the German detachments were at Waremmme, a few miles west of Liège, and on the outskirts of Tongres; and the main Belgian defensive line was turned. In two days, therefore, the Allies found the position they had come to exploit gravely and almost fatally prejudiced. Before



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they could be in a position to help, the time for effective help had passed.

They had hastened to the assistance of Holland and Belgium, in spite of a skilful and resolute attempt to prevent their movement. The main aerodromes and chief nodal points in France, as well as Belgium, had been heavily bombed in the beginning of the offensive. The Germans even bombarded the Lyons aerodrome from the air, and the French centres suffered more apparently than those of Belgium. Here, the attack had been expected; and, from most of the aerodromes the aeroplanes had been moved to others less known. At Diest, however, the German planes appearing out of the morning mist destroyed an important squadron.

In spite of every attempt to check them the British and French troops entered Belgium; and, in the afternoon of May the 10th, the British troops passing round Brussels were east of the capital. The French had reached Gemappes and the southern end of the Antwerp-Namur line. There were nine divisions in the British Expeditionary Force and three Territorial divisions. With the eleven French divisions of the First Army under General Blanchard and the twenty-two divisions of the Belgian Army the Allies were not numerically inferior to the German attacking force of forty divisions and eight armoured divisions.

The 9th French army was operating east of the Meuse, but, on the third day of the offensive, their motorized columns made little headway against the German pressure, for the enemy was attempting to push down both sides of the Meuse. On the west of the river their thrust was directed southward from Waremmes and on the east they were astride the river Ourthe. They were trying to enlarge the pocket established in the angle between the Albert Canal and the Meuse; and the French delivered a heavy

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attack with armoured cars, at the most westerly point of penetration, Saint-Trond. This, if not the first, was certainly the heaviest clash between the tanks that had occurred since the mobile fort made its first appearance twenty-five years before on the Somme. The Germans were depending on their armoured divisions for the speed of their advance, and two or three divisions were engaged in this area.

The Belgian outposts had been fighting with the utmost courage to hold the advanced line north of Saint-Trond, and a precarious equilibrium was established by means of these vigorous ripostes, for the Royal Air Force was persistently bombing the columns debouching along the Tongres road. Liège was still holding out and the glacis of the eastern forts was strewn with German dead. An attempt to cross the Albert Canal, in its western course, by means of boats was foiled by the concentrated fire from the Belgian casements.

Throughout these days the Germans continued to attack from the air. There can be no doubt the persistent air bombardment not only hindered the French moving up to their positions, but also had some effect on their *morale*. When they entered Belgium they were full of fire, but on at least one occasion near Namur they were caught almost in the open and for nearly twelve hours were subjected to continuous attack. The parachutists, though particularly persistent, appear to have had little success in Belgium. But the air attacks, impartially distributed between Fleming and Walloon cities, killed thousands of non-combatants, including women and children, and the roads began to fill with the pitiful procession of refugees. They made a good mark for low-flying bombers, who used their machine guns freely. It must have seemed to the Belgians that they were already deserted or hopelessly out-matched in the air;

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and the Germans soon began to play on this suggestion of isolation which was later to have so disastrous a success in a time of crisis.

M. Pierlot, the Belgian Foreign Minister, appeared to think the position in the Canal-Meuse triangle stabilized; but the Allies, regarding the situation more soberly, began to take up positions on the Antwerp-Namur line, though the struggle still continued on each side of the river. Huy appears to have been lost about this time; and the German thrust secured a further impetus since troops could now be passed across the Meuse to link up with the columns which had crossed west of Maastricht.

As the Allies took up position on the Antwerp-Namur line, the northernmost sector with its pill-box defence, echeloned in depth, was allocated to the Belgians. Louvain and to the south was the British sector, with the First French Army on their right up to Namur, where General Deffontaine's 7th Army Corps occupied the fortified position. On his right lay the 9th French Army under General Corap.

On the 13th the Germans entered the town of Liège. In August 1914 they had captured the town long before the forts gave way and history was now to repeat itself. The Swastika was promptly hoisted over the town; but for the present it was a barren victory. While the forts held out the German communications were restricted to secondary lines. And yet the pressure was kept up. Apparently irresistible, the machine made its way forward, taking ever the line of least resistance even when this meant, as frequently, sending tanks over the stream of helpless refugees or crushing them into the hedges or walls of houses. The columns were bombed; but the roads were choked only for an incredibly short space. With ruthless realism, the damaged machines were dragged or pushed aside and the living force went

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ahead once more. Is it to be wondered at that, after some days' experience of this relentless pressure, some of the Allied units began to regard the very mention of a tank with some feeling of despair. To mention a tank became the same thing as to announce an armoured column; and the Allies had found no sure means of dealing with the Panzer divisions.

Belgian motorized units and a cavalry corps made a spirited attack some miles in advance of the Allied line on the river Gette; but up to this moment the main forces had not made contact. The British troops first engaged the enemy this day when their advanced (mechanized) cavalry detachments encountered the Germans south-west of Louvain; and it was on this day that the Vroenhoven bridge was destroyed. The Royal Air Force formation of five was a volunteer squadron. Eight attempts to wreck the bridge had already been made; and, although the canal banks had been heavily damaged and the anti-aircraft batteries had been destroyed, no hit had been scored on the bridge. Flying Officer Garland and Sergeant Gray were the pilot and observer of the leading aeroplane. Attacking with the greatest resolution in spite of the terrific barrage of fire from the ground and from German aeroplanes they destroyed the bridge and received the first Victoria Crosses awarded to the Royal Air Force during the war. But neither of them returned; and, of the five aeroplanes which took part in this gallant operation, only one escaped.

The effort, moreover, was wasted. The infiltration was already too deep; and, with the loss of the crossing at Huy, the canal bridge no longer mattered. The attempt to restore the Albert Canal-Meuse position was doomed from the first. The Belgians had made their positions skilfully. They could scarcely have done more; but at Vroenhoven

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and Fort Eben Emael they had suffered tactical surprise, and, as frequently happens in warfare, that means success. If the Allies had been in Belgium before the German attack was launched more troops might have been allocated to the critical sector, and it remains a little startling that a success that was to prove in its way decisive was so quickly and so cheaply won. It was not the only event of the kind, since the battle was already moving southwards, and the Maginot Line was to be turned in as strange a way. It has been suggested that the line was turned at Vroenhoven, though Mr. Belloc, who sponsored the suggestion, was under the impression that the Meuse was crossed at Vise. It would be truer to suggest that it was turned in North Brabant. In no intelligible sense can it be said to have been turned in either place; but it was now about to be turned in a quarter where such a development was least expected.

General Corap's 9th French Army was responsible for the sector of the Meuse where it formed the southern boundary of the Belgian Ardennes and the southern frontier of Luxembourg. The French held that it was impossible to attack through such country; and it was in the nature of a strategical surprise that they found themselves staggering under a heavy blow from this direction. On this same Monday, May the 13th, the Germans had been encountered in many parts of the country east of the Meuse. It was broken country and in some parts densely wooded. Apparently a sudden attack was made along the line of the Meuse between Dinant and Sedan. At Dinant the river seems to run through a ravine and the picturesque citadel is perched on a cliff. Sedan, on the other hand, lies in a hollow and is difficult to defend on the spot. There can be no doubt that the attack on this sector came as a surprise; but it is still impossible to be sure of the size of the German force em-

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ployed. Reports have suggested that at Sedan the attack was made by only half an armoured division; but that may mean anything from 160 to 200 armoured cars. Some of them were 60-ton tanks and it seems clear that they completely demoralized the troops.

General Corap's army was one of the weakest in the operative wing of the Allies, for although Sedan was the pivot, the Meuse was held to be so serious an obstacle that it seemed reasonable to place there an army weak in numbers and training and poorly officered. But less than half of the divisions were actually on the line of the Meuse. M. Reynaud applied the term 'incredible' to this episode; and no better word can be found to describe it. The Meuse was quickly crossed at a number of points. Sedan itself, lying on the right bank of the Meuse, was evacuated. But so complete was the surprise and the consequent demoralization that, in crossing the river, no attempt was made to destroy the bridges, and across them at once poured the German armoured cars, preceded and accompanied by low-flying aeroplanes. So on the night of the 13th the Germans had penetrated the Meuse line, and quickly a pocket developed in the French positions south of the river.

The French counter-attacked vigorously; and one of the greatest air attacks which had been delivered up to that time took place on the following day. Light bombers of the Royal Air Force first bombed the pontoon bridges which had been flung across the Meuse, since, although the initial success had hardly been expected, the Germans were determined to exploit it to the full and they were now pressing forward with all their available force. The French began to give way under the pressure and the British and French bombers launched a combined attack on the crossings of the Meuse and the main lines of advancing reinforcements.

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'The attack was opened', says the Air Ministry statement, 'by a large wave of French bombers with fighter escorts and followed up by still heavier British formations. Over 150 allied aircraft took part in this operation, in which four bridges were destroyed, large tank and troop concentrations broken up, and roads blocked. The effect of this operation was to halt the German advance in the Sedan sector and enable the French to launch a vigorous counter-attack.

But the position was not restored, the check was only temporary, and it was shortly announced, with a complete lack of necessity, that the position was now one of 'open warfare'. It was 'open' in a way no-one would have dared to suggest a week before. The Germans were through the continuation of the Maginot Line, a fact which suggested the best comment on the thesis of the impregnability of the defensive. All positions, all weapons, every sort of military appliance is at last no stronger than the human heart that uses them. Commandant Andriot, two years before, had said '*Le matériel ne vaut que par ceux qui l'utilisent*'. On a dit (en particulier certaines personnalités qui, hors de l'armée, se targuent de régir l'opinion) que la guerre d'Espagne prouvait une fois du plus (!) la suprématie qu'a maintenant la défensive sur la offensive. Rien ne nous autorise à bouleverser à ce point nos idées tactiques.'

But, in point of fact, that appears to have been the conviction of General Gamelin and to have infected his subordinates, since it is difficult when one has accepted the theory of the supremacy of the defensive to avoid an unconscious tendency to regard it as having a validity of itself and, from that, to pass to a carelessness in manning the defensive. The quotation suggests that the conviction was not universal; but it was widespread, and for the breakdown at Sedan

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the main responsibility must be attributed to it. In a day or two, the official French spokesman was actually found describing as 'brilliant' the 'discovery' that the French 75 would stop the best tank in use, as though it was hitting below the intellect to fire point blank and without a slide rule, book of logarithms and trigonometrical tables. The raw artillery recruit dreams only of point-blank shots, but to the savant there is something a little indelicate about such crude methods.

For the moment the heavy tank, the tank of 'rupture', was supreme and went where it would. A tank or two was magnified into an armoured division, which has at least 320. The low-flying, or dive-bomber, did uncounted damage. It did not occur to anyone yet that a cool head and a steady heart could put it out with a 75, a Bren gun or even a rifle. Something appeared to snap at Sedan. Yet the flower of the Allied armies had not yet been engaged. In Belgium, they still stood on the Antwerp-Namur line. That very day, the 14th, there was a brisk skirmish at Gembloux.

But they were now across the French frontier and the armoured columns began to dart about in the rear of the armies, creating untold confusion and opening up vistas of which no responsible person on the Allied side had dreamed. The battle of the frontiers had lasted a bare five days before it gave Germany decisive victory.



## CHAPTER 13

### *The Break Through*

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**T**he event which conditioned the development of the war in the west was decisive, but it seems hardly to have been designed. Just before he died in 1913 General von Schlieffen drafted a revised plan to secure a decision in the west. It depended upon the invasion of the Low Countries and the inevitable attraction of the French armies to Belgium. He foresaw the concentration of these armies west of the Meuse and planned to break through the river barrier between Namur and Sedan, and then march round their right flank to complete the envelopment, meanwhile holding off the eastern armies with sufficient force.

It is not necessary to conclude that the German Staff in 1940 deliberately planned to follow this schedule, but that was what, as a fact, occurred. The new German tactics of infiltration and exploitation of every weak position involved a strategy the essence of which is extreme flexibility, and bold opportunism. Neither the tactics nor the implication was fully appreciated at the time. It was customary to read taunts against the Germans for their cowardice in avoiding strongly held positions and not standing against resolute attack. If such behaviour were involuntary it would be cowardly; but, adopted under deliberate order, it was merely a matter of discipline. How much splendid human material

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did Britain waste on the Somme in 1916 and at Passchendaele in the following year fighting against concrete, barbed wire, mud and machine-guns. It is not sound business, from a military point of view, to make a soldier do what a tank, an aeroplane or a gun can do better. A live robot is better than a dead hero.

The difficulty is that the habit of avoiding risk and shirking the task that involves peril may breed cowardice. Only iron discipline can save an army from that development; and there has been no sign of German soldiers shirking imminent peril when either the direct or the implied order involves it. On the contrary, there have been occasions when British soldiers, who are taught to fire coolly, wondered how long the Germans would continue to advance against their well-directed bullets. It was, however, the deliberate tactics of the German Army to exploit every weakness and, accordingly when they found fine, massive bridges over the Meuse left intact and only few and poor troops defending the crossing, they went ahead. At once into the pocket were flung masses of tanks, which, opening out fanwise, broke down resistance in all directions. Where they found a check, they paused until the dive-bombers could be summoned to open the way for further advance; and so perfect was the liaison between the ground and air forces that the delay was reduced to a minimum.

Armoured columns penetrated deep into the French position and it soon became clear that the Allies had no effective method of dealing with the new tactics. It was solemnly announced by the Allied command that, north of Sedan, a 'war of movement' was now in progress. The anxious onlooker was only too painfully aware of that, and the attempt to steady opinion by suggesting a new and more accurate standard of value failed of its effect.

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On May the 15th the defence of the fortified area of Namur was abandoned and the 7th Belgian Army Corps made its way through France to Flanders. On this day, too, the order was given to the Allied armies in Belgium to retreat, an irony which passed unnoticed at the time since it was not known then that the British troops had only completed their forward movement the day before. On this and the following days the British troops were hotly engaged in Louvain, though the Dyle to the north of the city had been crossed.

The order to fall back was part of a general movement of re-grouping the armies, and was due to the dangerous headway in France made by the German armoured columns, which were actually turning north-west, between the Sambre and Meuse, and threatening to penetrate to the rear of the Dyle positions. In conformity with this withdrawal, the 7th French Army, which had reached North Brabant and penetrated to Breda too late to prevent Dutch collapse, fell back via Antwerp. Its general, Girard, who had already been recalled to take command of the 9th Army, was later captured as he stepped from a tank to take over his new charge. On this same day, May the 16th, he was reported as saying that he had agreed with General Hunzinger that the situation was 'under control'.

But nothing could better show how little the statement was justified than this single fact that one of his generals should have stepped into the midst of Germans at La Capelle, near Hirson. The 9th Army was in retreat between the Sambre and the Meuse, but La Capelle lies some 50 miles from Namur as the crow flies, and only about 14 miles from Guise. The heads of the German advance were the armoured columns, and the battle was so little under control that on the Gembloux plateau, some miles north-west

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of Namur, a fierce struggle was still continuing. The forts at Liège were holding out; but miles to the west of them the Belgians were falling back steadily, step by step towards Ghent; and the British, on their right, were retiring from the Dyle positions on Brussels. Only here was there a battle front. Bodies of French troops, farther south, were fighting in groups while in their rear German armoured columns were spreading confusion and dismay.

On the 17th, Brussels and Antwerp were evacuated, though Colonel Modard, who had held one of the Liège forts in 1914, was defiantly maintaining the outer forts once more. The fighting in the Dutch province of Zeeland was dying down. The French division which had been assisting the forces under Rear-Admiral Van der Stad had evacuated the islands of Beveland and Walcheren and fallen back into the Belgian lines after firing the petrol stores at Flushing, the second naval base of Holland. On this sector of the front alone did the fighting resemble that of earlier wars. But in France it was entirely novel. There were engagements at Avesnes and Verdun, and the momentum of the attack was increasing as new German units crossed the Meuse south of Namur.

An attempt had been made to check the advance on the eastward side of the pocket, but west of the Meuse it was reaching farther almost hourly. There was fierce fighting north-west of Rethel on the upper Aisne, where a stubborn resistance was being offered. But the position seemed so grave that in the evening General Gamelin issued one of those orders which, appearing at all times of crisis, need no comment. 'All troops who cannot advance must die at their posts rather than abandon the part of national soil entrusted to them,' it said; but it was easier to say than to accomplish. Armies are like horses, they know instinctively when

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there is a firm hand on the bridle and sense any trace of indecision. The situation was almost out of hand already.

On the following day the struggle reached a crisis. The Belgian Government had taken up its residence in Ostend and under heavy pressure the Belgians and British had fallen back to the west. The Belgians were holding the Terneuzen Canal to Ghent and the Scheldt from there to Audenarde, with the British on their right south of that historic city. But the critical part of the struggle was taking place far to the south, on the Oise. The Germans had reached Landrecies, on the Sambre, a town which has seen so many critical engagements, and Guise, on the Oise; and along the Sambre-Oise Canal they began to press westward. On this sector of the front, a space of about 15 miles, the Germans threw into the struggle heavy tanks accompanied by low-flying aeroplanes. The French met them with numbers of 75's, which, firing at the tanks point-blank, wrought great havoc. For some time the Germans were held; and, at places where the advance made headway, they were checked by immediate counter-attack.

Between Guise and the area north-west of Laon the struggle was not so fierce. The light tanks were held at Ribemont, and between Laon and the south of Sedan the advance made little headway except near Rethel, where, as on the preceding day, the French were still resisting stubbornly against a heavy onslaught. To the east, between Rethel and Sedan, the eastern side of the pocket was being strengthened by a series of vigorous counter-attacks.

But already the Germans were claiming to have taken 110,000 prisoners and it is clear that the rapidity of their advance into France had overtaken and passed a number of French divisions. Every effort was made to check the advance westward, but it was evident that by midday on the

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19th the Germans had broken through towards the west. They had crossed the Sambre and Oise Canal, had captured Le Cateau and Saint-Quentin, and were in flat country which offered the best advantages to exploitation by motorized divisions. In Flanders, Artois and Picardy hilly country is rare.

It is obvious that the advance was pressed westward by the armoured divisions. The light motorized divisions were rapidly following up, and behind toiled the main mass of infantry. The Allied front had been broken and the sides of the pocket were being pressed outwards, the easterly side towards the Somme and the westerly towards the Channel ports; and possibilities undreamed of even a few days before began to appear upon the horizon.

The Allied armies were now in two parts. The larger part, in which lay the vast bulk of the Allies, was approaching the Somme. The smaller, comprising two French armies, the British Expeditionary Force and the Belgian Army, was being driven in towards the coast. On the 20th the breach was complete and the Germans were consolidating their left flank. They had reached the Oise-Aisne Canal; but an attempt to cross the Aisne at Rethel was vigorously countered. For several days the Germans had been trying to make headway there, and if the French had only held every sector as securely as they did that, it is impossible the Allies should have reached their present plight. To the west and south-west the armoured detachments appeared to advance almost as they wished. On this day one of them actually cut the road between Valéry-sur-Somme and Abbeville.

On the extreme north of the Allied front the Belgians and British were maintaining their positions. The Germans had reached the Scheldt south of Ghent, but against the positions on that river and south of the Scarpe the armoured

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divisions beat in vain. The British troops held them off. But there was fierce fighting about Maubeuge and Valenciennes.

The break in the Allied front had produced an extraordinary position, and the northern armies were at the moment being turned back upon themselves. Under the pressure of the German advance amazing confusion existed in the French sector. At Valenciennes, for some days, the French were using the frontier defences in reverse, and using them to some purpose. At Maubeuge, also, some use was at length being found for the 'defensive in depth', which had been praised as though it were of a strength equal to that of the Maginot Line. Indeed, most Frenchmen had been allowed to think that the Maginot Line covered the whole frontier between the North Sea and the Mediterranean.

On the preceding day, the 19th, General Weygand, who had been until that moment the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied forces in the Near East, was appointed Chief of the General Staff of National Defence and Commander-in-Chief of all theatres of operations. General Weygand had been Foch's Chief of Staff in the Great War and he had been instrumental in assisting the Poles to defeat the Bolsheviks in front of Warsaw. But he was now over seventy years of age, and Marshal Petain, who had become deputy Prime Minister, was eighty-four. Yet these two men were perhaps the best trusted men in France and their accession to the Government sent a thrill of renewed hope throughout the country.

A few days later M. Reynaud delivered to the Senate one of the most courageous speeches it has ever heard. He described with the utmost frankness the 'incredible mistakes' that had been made and 'the disaster and total disorganiza-

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tion' of General Corap's army, 'which was in charge of the hinge of the Allied armies'. The position when General Weygand assumed command in place of General Gamelin was that 'a breach of 100 kilometres (60 miles) had been opened in our front' and through it had poured a German army composed of motorized divisions. After describing what he considered to be the cause of the breakdown, he went on to say, 'As for me, if I were told to-morrow that only a miracle could save France I should reply, "I believe in miracles because I believe in France."' "

But the position was almost serious enough to demand a miracle, the miracle of instantaneous reaction to new tactics and a new situation, and it was not given before disaster was complete. The German success was not, of course, won without a great expense in human life: though 'only a small part of that splendid Army (the French) had yet been engaged', as Mr. Churchill said in his first broadcast after becoming Prime Minister, and though the Germans of set purpose used machines rather than men to break down resistance. They had now been engaged for eleven days continuously; and the twelve armoured divisions could not be used at every part of the front. They had lost heavily; and in view of later statements it is of importance to note that when this phase of the campaign was complete the Berlin newspaper *Der Montag* found itself compelled to deny reports that 'Germany is sacrificing lives unscrupulously'. It stated that such reports had not 'been proved' and then went on to insist that the 'success had not been achieved without regrettable losses. These losses, however, are not greater than the German losses on the Somme and the Marne in the last war'. This might be taken for the ill-considered statement of a rash journalist, but for the fact that almost the same words were used by Hans Fritzsche of



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the Propaganda Ministry His formula was that the casualties 'are smaller than the German losses in the Somme battle in the Great War'. Now the official German losses in the first battle of the Somme were 444,933 and in the second 200,000. The suggestion obviously was that the losses were very considerable, since no official could possibly have meant the second battle without saying so. It is hardly possible to imagine that the intention was not to suggest the second while meaning the first.

## CHAPTER 14

### *The Drive to the Channel Ports*

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General Weygand, assuming command on May the 19th, at once saw himself faced with colossal tasks and he recognized that they must be carried out under the pressure of an enemy even more inexorable than the Germans—time. He had first to find his army. Part of it lay steady and visible on a line running from the Meuse, south of the Sedan, through Rethel and the Aisne and thence westward by Saint Quentin to the Somme. Amiens was in enemy hands by the 21st and an armoured detachment was in Abbeville. But at first the position was not so clearly defined as that; only the sector from Rethel eastward was recognizable as a stable position. Towards the west and still more towards the north it was not at all clear where his armies were and what they were doing.

The 9th Army appeared to exist no longer as an army. It was already in process of dissolution; and there were also other Allied forces which had been cut off and were surrounded in the rapid advance. At least it seemed certain that what the Germans had attempted in vain to do in March 1918, they had accomplished in 1940, they had cut the Allied armies in two and immense issues depended on re-establishing union. Unless this could be effected in the shortest possible time, it might never be effected, and the

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Germans would be granted the chance to take their enemy in sections. The armies he visited had suffered unequally, but he was able to convince himself that they had been badly trained, badly led and badly shaken. But every hour that the breach remained unrepaired it threatened to widen, threatened to become irreparable; and meanwhile more and more armoured and motorized divisions might penetrate through the gap to the Allied rear. As early as May the 21st the Germans were boasting that the 'ring has been closed' round the northern armies.

General Gort, however, was better able to appreciate the risks of the situation than General Weygand. His old general, now his *rear*, headquarters lay at Arras. This city was one of the most important centres of communication in the north and was therefore a valuable centre to hold. It lies only about forty-eight miles from Boulogne; but on May the 18th, when the critical struggle which was to produce the breach in the Allied armies was taking place far to the east it seemed wise to prepare for retirement. Several armoured divisions were operating uncomfortably near for units that could move so quickly and General Petre was called from his 15th division headquarters to take charge of the defence. On the following day heavy fighting had moved towards the north-east of Saint Quentin and the breach in the army appeared to threaten his position. Armoured and motorized detachments appeared south of the Scarpe.

The British Commander saw the risk of a complete breach and the chance to repair it by speedy action. General Ironside met General Billotte, the commander of the 1st French Army, and General Blanchard on May the 20th, and it was arranged that an attack should be delivered across the Scarpe towards the south. General Billotte, who had the duty to co-ordinate the movements of the Belgian, British

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and French armies, not only agreed but promised that a French division from the 1st French Army should continue the British left flank and co-operate in the attack towards the south.

At this time, the British troops had established themselves on the line of the Scheldt Canal with seven divisions holding the line and two in reserve. On the right rear Lord Gort had pressed into service three Territorial divisions also attached to his command to provide stops at Lens, Bethune, Douai, Albert and Bapaume. The Territorials, though only partly trained and lacking artillery, fought with gallantry and protected not only the rear of the British Army, but also that of the 1st French Army, which, after a heavy battering, was trying to reorganize on General Gort's right.

The gap separating the two sections of the armies of the Allies was about twenty-five miles at the moment, and it was decided that the attack towards the south should be delivered at 2 p.m. on the next day, the 21st, by the two British divisions from reserve, the 50th and the 5th, with elements from the 1st Cavalry (mechanized) Corps on the right. On the morning of the 21st General Gort was informed that the French division would not be ready until the following day and he determined to attack without it.

At this point one may well ask if the French general who had approved the plan had appreciated the over-riding importance of time. There comes a moment in all battles when the chances of success are so great and so fleeting that daring is prudence. It seems a remarkable thing that General Billotte when he had agreed with General Ironside did not at once suggest to his chief, General Weygand, the immense advantage of co-operating from the south and did not, at the very least, stretch every nerve to assist himself.

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In view of the absurd criticisms of Lord Gort's later action, made by M. Baudouin, some explanation is required of this amazing detachment of General Billotte from an action which he approved and which held such tremendous possibilities for the future of the Allies.

As it was, the attack was delivered and into it was flung all the British tanks available. The first objective near the river Cojeul, five miles to the south, was reached swiftly; the tanks even halved the gap between the two wings of the Allies and numbers of prisoners were taken. But it soon became apparent that the attack was meeting not merely a few raiding armoured divisions, but German infantry in some strength. For the next two days the British troops fought hard, especially in front of Arras; but the Germans were making a vigorous attempt to work round their right or western flank and Lord Gort had to withdraw them if he wished to prevent their envelopment.

This was the one actual attempt to close the breach. But while it was actually in progress General Weygand had visited La Panne, and expounded his plan to close the gap by simultaneous attacks from the north and south of the gap. The northern was to be delivered by the 1st French Army and the British Expeditionary Force striking south from Valenciennes and Douai and the southern by the French striking north from the neighbourhood of Roye. General Gort had not been informed in time to be present at the meeting, but General Billotte described the plan to him later in the same day at Ypres. It will occur to everyone that the general idea of this plan would have been equally applicable on May the 21st when Gort's attack was launched, and it would have stood an immeasurably better chance of success than if delivered several days later.

The plan, however, was approved in London and the

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British Commander was notified. Lord Gort now saw General Blanchard, who, on General Billotte's being killed in a motor accident, had been appointed in his place to co-ordinate the movements of the northern armies, and suggested that the attack should be delivered by two British and three French divisions. He insisted that he could not be ready until the 26th, and he learned that the French would have preferred the 25th. The later date, however, was agreed upon; but on the 25th the Germans attacked the Belgians heavily at Courtrai and a gap threatened to appear on the British left flank. Lord Gort saw that he had no alternative but to use the two divisions, the 50th and the 5th, which he had allocated to the southern attack, to stop the gap on his left. He informed General Blanchard that the divisions would not be available for the attack planned and he feared that, in the circumstances the French would not attack.

Such was indeed the case; but it is very difficult to understand how anybody can now suggest that the British were responsible for the abandonment of the Weygand plan. The bulk of the French armies lay to the south. Surely it would have been possible to have put more troops into the southern blow and for the French to have struck south even without British help. If the plan foundered because two divisions were lacking, it seems reasonable to conclude that the real culprit was the time-lag which had had so grave an effect upon the campaign from the beginning. Certainly it would have assisted the Allies not at all for General Gort to have allowed a gap to develop on his left in order to stop one on his right.

The position had, in fact, deteriorated strikingly since Weygand mooted his plan. The German armoured columns penetrated to Montreuil and Saint-Pol on the very day he

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visited La Panne. A considerable stretch of the Channel coast was now in the enemy's hands. On the following day they were fighting in and around Boulogne and advancing upon Calais. The resistance in these two places had a certain magnificence which obscured its direct military value. The Germans were pressing northward in the rear of the Allies in the hope of enveloping the complete force. Long before such a possibility rose above the horizon they were creating confusion in the Allied communications and seriously depressing the *morale* of some of the troops. The resistance in the two places secured time for the Gravelines waterline to be flooded and held by the French.

Boulogne was held by the Guards until they were withdrawn by orders from England and when it fell, on May the 25th, the Germans stated that it was taken after 'a grim fight by land and sea forces'. All the preceding day Marines and Royal Engineers, specially detailed for the purpose, had been fitting demolition charges to bridges, cranes and lock gates. Over the high land to the south of the port the armoured columns and motorized troops were approaching; and the station was already under fire from German mobile field guns. French and British destroyers were shelling the enemy columns, but without preventing them from closing in. Throughout the day German aircraft made repeated bombing attacks and only desisted on the appearance of British fighters.

The town was surrounded, and it was evident it could not be held much longer. Bridges and cranes were then destroyed, the floating dock was sunk, power houses and dock gates were blown up, while dive-bombers attempted to check the work. The evacuation now began and the destroyers which entered the harbour to take the men off came under a heavy fire from field guns and advancing tanks. In

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spite of the terrific fire and many casualties the men embarked with perfect discipline and then the destroyers brought their guns to bear and made short work of the tanks. When darkness fell, the station was still full of men and the last three destroyers which took them off were listing heavily with the number of troops. The withdrawal was not palatable; but the way in which it was carried out and the splendid co-operation of all three services redeemed the episode from complete misfortune.

Calais was held by the Rifle Brigade, a battalion of the 60th Rifles, a battalion of the Queen Victoria's Rifles, a battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment and about 1,000 French troops, in all some 4,000 men. On May the 23rd the Queen Victoria's Rifles were blocking the approaches from Boulogne, west of the town, and the approach from Dunkirk on the east. The Rifle Brigade and 60th Rifles lay east of the town. During the night the latter moved to the outer defences, but the next day it was found impossible to contact the Queen Victoria's Rifles at Sangatte, and with the heavy fighting it was decided that the outer positions could not be held. It was not until dark that the 60th Rifles withdrew to the inner lines and the position was held all day.

A heavy bombardment took place in the afternoon; but although the attack had been reinforced the troops stood their ground. Brigadier-General Nicholson had established his headquarters in the Calais Citadel, built by Vauban in 1661. Early on Sunday morning the Germans called upon him to surrender and met with a curt refusal. At nine o'clock a heavy bombardment began and German dive-bombers delivered repeated attacks on the Citadel, inner town and docks, which were soon in flames. At 4 p.m. the dock area was captured and with it the remainder of the Rifle Brigade. A little later the French troops in the Citadel



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surrendered and General Nicholson was captured in his headquarters.

The 60th Rifles and part of the Queen Victoria's Rifles managed to hold out, in spite of a shortage of water and ammunition, until late that night, when further resistance was impossible. The Germans described this as the fiercest fighting of the war. The struggle appears to have been as bitter as it was prolonged, for the small force had held out from May the 21st to May the 26th with little sleep, food or water and it had had to overcome another and in some respects a more intractable handicap. Streams of refugees continued to enter and move about the town. When the struggle developed into street fighting, these became a grave obstacle to the defenders, though they were ignored by the Germans. It was only discovered later that this small force had held up two armoured divisions which would otherwise certainly have been turned against the then exposed flank of the British Expeditionary Force.

With the fall of Calais all the points on the Channel coast nearest England were in German hands. The battle of the Channel ports had reached its penultimate stage. The attempt to keep open communications with the British Expeditionary Force had, in its larger sense, been defeated. It had been decided elsewhere, and, on the day that Calais fell, the French were exacting retribution. Fifteen generals were relieved of their commands. Gamelin had already gone. But these disciplinary events could not restore the original position. The French Reserve, unfortunately placed behind the Maginot Line, had not been available when the Germans cut the Allied armies into two parts.

But the sequel was even now far from exhausted. One of the Allies was being driven to surrender.

## CHAPTER 15

### *The Surrender of the Belgian Army*

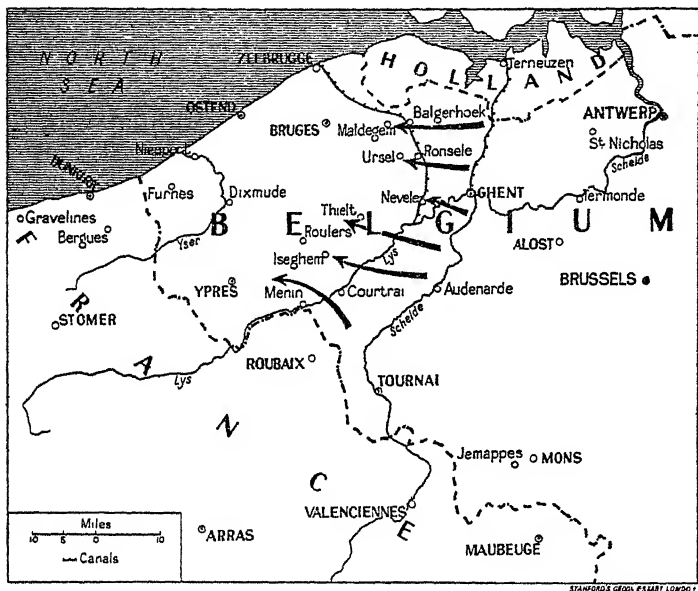
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While the British Expeditionary Force was attempting to effect a junction between the severed ends of the Allied armies, they and the Belgian Army were also engaged in severe fighting along the Scheldt and Scheldt canal. On May the 22nd the Belgian front measured fifty-four miles. All the divisions capable of fighting were in the line and the only reserve consisted of worn-out and weary troops. Stretched out on the line of the Terneuzen canal to Ghent and thence to Oudenarde, they maintained their positions decisively. The Germans who had crossed the Scheldt in two places were hurled back to the right bank. But on the 23rd the French were heavily attacked on the upper Scheldt, where they had fought their way to the outskirts of Cambrai. Much more serious was the assault which succeeded in crossing the Scheldt at Oudenarde. This historic town is only forty miles from Ostend and the precarious position on the Belgian and French sector of the English Channel was now assailed from another direction. It was being threatened at the moment from the south; now it was menaced from the east.

Liège and Namur still stood defiant before the Germans; but the Belgian armies in the field were struggling on the last few miles of the national territory. It seems that an

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energetic counter attack had thrown the enemy back across the Scheldt at Oudenarde; but it was only a momentary flicker of reaction. The Belgians were holding much too extended a line and with the British they fell back to the Lys and the Lys canal. The British troops withdrew in perfect



### *8. The last attacks on the Belgian Army*

order under no pressure from the enemy; but on the 24th there was a violent attack on a front of two Belgian divisions, both sides of Courtrai. The Germans, with that sure instinct for any signs of wavering in the troops that opposed them, had determined to make an end.

The Belgian reserves counter-attacked at Courtrai but were subjected to a terrific bombardment from the air. They

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were unable to make any reply. The army had no fighting 'planes left. The French had no squadrons available, and the British 'planes always found in this stage of the campaign twice as much to do as they could possibly undertake. The hard-pressed Belgian troops had therefore seen no Allied 'planes for some days, while the Germans insisted in performing acrobatics above their heads. They even dropped leaflets with neat little maps showing that the Belgians were surrounded.

This was, perhaps, the decisive day for the Belgian Army. They had only just made a great withdrawal. Indeed their life for the last fortnight seemed to have been nothing but a series of withdrawals; and it is the rarest thing in warfare to find the troops who can sustain that ordeal without losing heart. Though the French division withdrawn from Walcheren lay north of Bruges and the British were on their right, the sensation of isolation upon which the German propagandists harped was nevertheless strong. The soldier sees no further than a few yards and his convictions are largely bounded by his experience.

The King of the Belgians, sensitive beyond the average, had assumed the command of his troops. He could sense the feelings of his men, and so it was that on the morrow he issued a proclamation which, in view of what followed, deserves to be put on record.

### SOLDATS

La grande bataille qui nous attendait a commencé

Elle sera rude. Nous la conduirons de toutes nos forces avec une suprême énergie.

Elle se livre sur le terrain où en 1914 nous savons tenu victorieusement tête à l'envahisseur.

## *The Surrender of the Belgian Army*

### SOLDATS

La Belgique attend que vous fassiez honneur à son Drapeau.

### OFFICIERS, SOLDATS

Quoi qu'il arrive, mon sort sera le vôtre.

Je demande à tous de la fermeté, de la discipline, de la confiance.

Notre cause est juste et pure.

La Providence nous aidera.

### VIVE LA BELGIQUE!

#### LÉOPOLD

en campagne, le 25 mai 1940.

The proclamation produced a tremendous impression ' *Quoi qu'il arrive, mon sort sera le vôtre.* ' ' Whatever happens I shall remain with you. ' ' We shall share alike ' The Belgians needed heartening They were heavily engaged themselves and all about them the battle raged in a sort of confused mêlée. But it could be noticed that the Germans very skilfully seized upon all good defensive points as opportunity offered. They occupied the heights of Notre Damede Lorette, which had been the scene of much bloody fighting in the Great War, and on the following day they occupied Vimy Ridge, which was separated from it by the Souchez. They were attacking in force between Valenciennes, Cambrai and Arras Between Roubaix and Valenciennes and Vimy they advanced north-west on each side of Douai

Along the Somme, Oise, Aisne and Meuse the Allied armies were reforming and organizing a defensive position in depth They were tested here and there by the Germans, who secured the bridgeheads for the resumption of the advance much as they wished But the main attack was being

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delivered on the northern sector of the line. The Germans had pushed almost to Gravelines in the rear of the Allied positions.

But on the Belgian front the troops had reacted to the king's proclamation and they even delivered a counter-attack which captured five hundred prisoners. The communiqué on Sunday was full of resolution. 'In spite of the many and hard struggles which have been fought during the past two weeks, and in spite of the difficult conditions under which the troops have had to take up new positions, the forces have maintained their strength and *morale*.'

Yet only the night before General Gort had been so impressed by the result of the German attack on the Belgians on his left that he had been compelled to send there the 50th and 5th Divisions, which had been destined to take part, with the 1st French Army, in the attack towards the south to attempt to reunite the two halves of the Allied armies. It was later in the day that the Germans developed their attack against the Belgian sector on a front of twenty-five miles. The British front, less heavily assailed, held their own; but against the Belgians the Germans, in great strength, and assisted by tanks, artillery and aircraft, attacked with utter disregard of losses. Their evident objective was Ostend; and the battle raged all day.

The Belgian front at this time flung a wide arc to the east of Thorout, from the coast to Menin. The northern part of the line was the Canal Leopold from the sea near Zeebrugge to its junction with the canal de Schipdoncle to the Lys and south-west towards the neighbourhood of Menin. It had been thoroughly organized as far as the time permitted; and elaborate precautions had been taken in the rear to hold up German armoured divisions in case they should break through. A railway line was packed with rail-

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way wagons which made a difficult obstacle for tanks to cross.

But when the heavy blow fell on this Sunday, May the 26th, in spite of the most resolute resistance and the assistance of British troops, the Belgians gave way. Contact with the British was broken west of Menin and for some time it would not have been impossible for the Germans to have forced their way through to Dunkirk. The last reserves were brought up. The troops used on the lines of communication were put in the front line; but in spite of every effort the line was broken at Balgerhoek, Ronsele, Nevele, and Iseghem. The position seemed so desperate that the Yser was manned. But the line was skilfully withdrawn under pressure and new positions were taken up in front of Maldegem, Ursel and Thielt. But they were allowed no respite.

In the Great War Foch had, unnecessarily, urged French not to retreat because of the terrible increase in the pressure and the tendency to rout. How often had his warning been verified in the present war. The Belgians at this moment were compelled to give ground. Neither the British nor the French could give them much assistance, since the Germans were engaging them too. They had repeatedly attacked Valenciennes and only on the 27th, after repulsing two German attacks, did the French fall back to prepared positions. On the same day the British were engaged with numerically superior forces near Aire, on the Lys, and achieved a marked success.

But the assault on the Belgians had never been allowed to die down. As the Germans sensed the tendency to yield they continued to press forward with the support of artillery fire and again their attack showed an utter disregard of losses. The Belgians sent forward their last reserve of three regiments; but what Lord Gort had feared two days before

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had now happened. There was a breach between his Army and that of King Leopold. By midday further gaps appeared at Maldegem, Ursel and between Thielt and Roulers. In the last sector there was a space of about four miles without even a pretence of defence, and at one place the Germans had suddenly appeared at the local headquarters. The troops gave way step by step

The position now appeared to be intolerable. The army had lost heavily. There were numbers of wounded, the hospitals were full and the supply of artillery shells was falling. The pocket in which the Allies fought was gradually shrinking; and, behind the Belgian front, long lines of civilian refugees were wandering along the roads, constantly under aircraft and artillery fire. It seemed impossible to retreat any further. The men were too weary and, with the Germans in possession of effective mastery of the air, every step was taken under bombardment and against the inevitable resistance of the refugees on the roads.

It was under such circumstances that at 5 p.m. the King communicated with German headquarters; on the following day, May the 28th, the Belgian Army surrendered unconditionally. Some of the forts on the Meuse were still holding out

When the plenipotentiaries were sent to the German Command the British Mission under Sir Roger Keyes, which had been attached to King Leopold, took their leave. Arrangements were made at the same time to send to Dunkirk by lorries the French division which had been fighting with the Belgian Army after its withdrawal from Zeeland. But nevertheless the action was taken without consulting or warning the Allies. 'That King who, eighteen days before, had appealed for Allied help,' said M. Reynaud broadcasting to France, 'had now, without any warning to



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the Allied forces, laid down his arms. This was a deed without precedent in history.'

In a few weeks these words were recalled, for it must have been noticed how much more censorious M. Reynaud was than Mr. Churchill. Yet, of course, the King's action was appallingly inconvenient for the Allies. It placed them in imminent jeopardy at once, and it is inevitable one should recall that, however 'incredible' the mistakes of the French Command, King Leopold's appeal must be held at least partly responsible for the present plight of the Allies. It had, in fact, a double responsibility. The Allies had left their frontier positions in response to it and against the judgement of General Gamelin; but they might easily have advanced beyond this zone and yet have intervened decisively in Belgium. That they had been unable to do so was due to the manner in which the King made his appeal. He insisted on waiting until the Germans had invaded his country before making it, and by so doing he brought it about that the Allied intervention must be made under disadvantageous conditions. Though the advance guards of the British and French troops were across the frontier within a few hours, the forward movement of the Expeditionary Force was only completed on May the 14th, and by that time the Belgian defensive position had been breached on the Albert Canal.

While this is perfectly true, it must not be forgotten that, admitting all this, the plight of the Belgian Army and with it that of all the Allies in the north was due to the 'incredible' blunders of the French command. King Leopold and his staff had seen the blunders and they had seen no sign that the French had recovered. General Weygand had visited the King and had expounded his plan for the reunion of the severed parts of the Army. But day followed day and

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that consummation appeared to be as distant as ever. Worse still, the Germans were advancing swiftly up the coastal area. Abbeville, Étaples, Boulogne and Calais fell. The Germans reached Gravelines. Meanwhile the Belgian Army was being deliberately battered to bits. The assistance given by the British Expeditionary Force was small, though it was all that could be given. 'The air seemed to be in full control of the Germans. Either the British and French could not, or would not, help him.

Then came the smashing blows of the last four days, attacks that appeared continuous and left his Army in imminent peril of destruction. Its front had twice been cut into sections which were only reunited with the greatest difficulty. What was to be done? The streams of refugees met his eye wherever he went and his brave army, which had fought so skilfully and resolutely for over a fortnight, could neither advance nor retreat. It had reached the limit of endurance. The King had said '*Quoi qu'il arrive, mon sort sera le vôtre.*' He was too sensitive to insist on others continuing to suffer what he could not share, too brave to leave them to fight it out. He surrendered.

King Leopold had been a figure of tragedy from the beginning. He had come to the throne through the tragic death of his father, he had been widowed by the no less tragic death of his Queen. If he had been made of tougher mettle, these events might have tempered his steel to endurance. It is significant that, seen in his own home, Leopold leaves the impression of a handsome, charming young man. The men who are called upon to direct the rough struggle of war are rarely possessed of almost effeminate good looks and distinct charm. Their work demands sterner qualities.

It is, of course, very difficult to condone his failure to

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give warning, yet in face of the almost unbearable conditions of the hour and the failure of Weygand to take any steps to improve them, can it seriously be maintained that twenty-four, forty-eight, or even seventy-two hours' notice would have made the surrender appreciably easier for the Allies? The fact is General Weygand was, as somebody said at the time, 'cutting his losses' But an army which is written off as a 'loss' may consider itself entitled to look to itself.

This consideration hardly excuses the King's omission; but it at least minimizes the ground for complaint Yet the surrender was a blow, and the Belgian Government at once condemned it. The Foreign Minister broadcast from Paris on the evening of the 28th a statement that the King had opened separate negotiations in spite of the unanimous advice of the Government. This suggests that the Allies must have been aware of the possibility of the King's action. M. Pierlot went on to stigmatize the action as unconstitutional. 'Henceforth he has no power to govern, since obviously the functions of the head of the State cannot be carried out under foreign control. Officers and public servants are therefore released from the obedience imposed upon them by their oath of allegiance.' Only his own people can use words such as these. Let it be noted that he asked for no terms of peace He merely ordered his soldiers to cease fighting The Dutch Commander-in-Chief had done no less.

The King passed out of the public eye into the keeping of his German masters, true to his blood, a tragic figure. Between 300,000 and 400,000 weary soldiers at length obtained a rest. The Government declared that it would continue the struggle and thereby assured that the rich products of the Belgian Congo—fats, maize, rubber and many precious metals—passed to the Allies The balance sheet is not easy to cast up.

## CHAPTER 16

### *The Epic of Dunkirk*

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Whatever view is taken of King Leopold's action it is certain that it left the British Expeditionary Force and the remnants of the two French Armies in imminent peril. The British Army had been supplied from Dunkirk as its forward base; and at once the Command decided that it must evacuate through it as many of the troops as possible. The Belgian Army which had laid down its arms was between 300,000 and 400,000 strong; and, weary as the troops were, they had yet held the northern flank of the Allied line. This force removed at a stroke, it must have seemed that the Germans would be free to move upon Dunkirk through the open flank. Fortunately there had been sufficient warning for the British to throw back a defensive line past Ypres and Dixmude, along the Yser to Nieuport. On the south, the line after reaching to the neighbourhood of Armentières was drawn back north-west towards Gravelines.

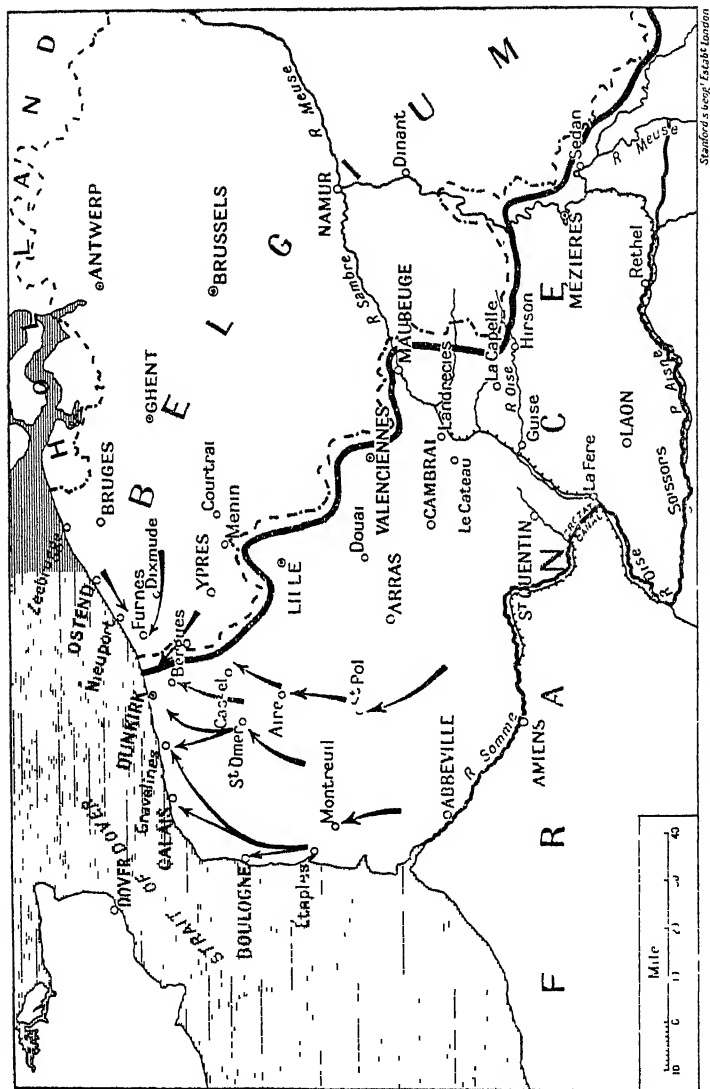
Beyond this small area the Army of General Prioux was fighting its way with General Blanchard's troops towards Dunkirk. Ostend had been occupied. Dixmude and Ypres were reached by the Germans, advancing through the sullen ranks of the surrendered Belgian Army. The position appears, in any complete description, to be quite beyond

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redemption; and if one had begun to read the German communiqués only that day, this conclusion would have been confirmed. On the 29th, for instance, it was stated that the German troops were continuing their attack 'to *annihilate* the British Expeditionary Force.' Then it is said that 'the fate of the French armies in Artois *is sealed*. . . The British Army . . . is threatened with *annihilation*' But the Germans had been 'annihilating' the Army for some time and continued to do so even after the bulk of it was recovering in England.

Thus on May the 23rd, while the two British divisions were fighting south of Arras, the German communiqué said that 'The area in which the enemy armies in Northern France and Belgium are surrounded was again reduced.' On the following day 'The *ring* round the Belgian Army, parts of the First, Seventh and the Ninth French Armies and the major part of the British Expeditionary Force, was considerably strengthened yesterday (24th) and has thereby *been finally closed*.' On Sunday the 27th 'the German troops continued their concentric attack against the *encircled enemy armies*' The following day 'they pressed *the encirclement* of the enemy armies closer together in a constantly narrowing ring'. On the 30th 'The Great Battle in Flanders and Artois is drawing to a close with the *annihilation* of the British and French Armies fighting in that area.' The communiqués ceased annihilating the British, at least, in a day or two.

Such vapourings are characteristic of the German mentality but it must have seemed to anyone who looked at the chances when the Belgians surrendered that capture or annihilation was the most probable fate of the Allies. Mr. Churchill, when announcing the Belgian surrender, said that 'the House should prepare itself for hard and heavy



Standard & Map Co. Ltd. London

9. The last stand at Dunkirk and the line on which the main Allied armies prepared to give battle on June the 4th

## *The Epic of Dunkirk*

tidings'. And there were few people who heard those words without understanding how slight was the chance that any appreciable part of the Allied Armies in the north could escape disaster. The official German News Agency said on the 28th that 'most of the British forces in a position to be evacuated from Belgium had already embarked.'

Dunkirk was transformed into an entrenched camp. It was held by Vice-Admiral Abrial and French Marines, and was supplied by the French Navy and a great number of ships. But the struggle to capture it was of a desperate nature; and a thousand engagements ranging from the sharp, improvised *coup de grâce* of a company to the clash of divisions took place on its fringes or far beyond. For there were fragments of the 9th and 7th as well as the 1st French Army attempting to escape through Dunkirk, and they fought towards all points of the compass. Cassel hill was taken by the Germans after an attack from the west as well as the east.

At one time the nine British divisions held a front of eighty miles and stood there till it was possible to retire. But the pressure on all sides grew as the perimeter of the camp contracted. It was roughly circumscribed by a line from Nieuport to Armentières and back to the south of Bergues on the day of the Belgian surrender. On the following day, although the northern flank was roughly the same, as far as the neighbourhood south of Ypres, the line swung from that point almost due west to a point north of Cassel and from there ran to Gravelines. But on the next day, May the 31st, the area had shrunk to a mere fringe defined by a line between Furnes and Bergues. At first the British held the whole position; then the French took over half and finally, in the last phase the French defended the whole and held it to the end.

## *The Epic of Dunkirk*

Throughout these days, since the opening of the German offensive, the Royal Air Force had been of invaluable assistance. It had been called in to destroy the bridge over the Albert Canal. It had gained the French a respite at Sedan by mass attacks. It had, on that occasion, taken all risks deliberately, as at the Albert Canal bridge, and on both occasions it had suffered accordingly. Railways, roads, bridges, and enemy troop concentrations had been bombed repeatedly. Armoured columns had been constantly attacked, and only the fact that they were at times moving through the drifting streams of refugees brought them immunity. But when the struggle welled in to the Channel coast it not only brought the enemy nearer to England; it also brought England nearer to the enemy. The Germans had counted on this nearer approach to England to allow them to send their fighter planes to accompany the bombers; but, of course, it gave England a similar advantage with regard to the German aerodromes. And so it came about that when the Allies were in their hour of extremity on the Channel coast the British fighters were able to take the air to assist them. Formations of Hurricanes and Defiants began to appear regularly over Dunkirk and in the area to the east and the south, and it is not easy to imagine how the evacuation through Dunkirk could have been carried out otherwise. As it was, troops waiting to be taken off saw German planes and complained that they saw no British. But no means has yet been found of preventing aeroplanes appearing over any given territory even if the defending force is immensely superior numerically. As it was, the Royal Air Force was much inferior to the German force that could be put against it; but there is not the smallest doubt that it did magnificent work in keeping within control the work of the German bombing squadrons. The hardly pressed flanks of



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the armies in Flanders were enormously relieved by the action of the Royal Air Force. On Wednesday the 29th the British fighters repeatedly broke up formations of enemy fighters and bombers, while bombers persistently attacked enemy transport columns and armoured fighting vehicles, bridges and machine-gun emplacements. Fighters destroyed over seventy-seven enemy aircraft on that day alone.

Despite all the help the Royal Air Force could give, the fighting around Dunkirk was of a desperate character. The British Expeditionary Force had, however, a definite line and the elements of the three French Armies that were trying to fight through to Dunkirk were fighting in groups over an extended area. The most stubborn engagements took place at centres such as Lille and Cassel, which were embedded in the frontier defensive system and were frequently held with reversed front. Nearer the coast, the operations were covered and assisted by the British and French navies, not without loss. In all these operations the British soldier showed himself at his best. He had from his entry into Belgium advanced or retreated as ordered; but his line had never been broken, and his calm, unhurried action had been an inspiration in a theatre which had seen two armies broken down.

Under cover of these splendid rearguard actions, the small force, almost completely surrounded, held off the Germans, who, seeing their enemy escape, redoubled their efforts. The troops not immediately engaged were evacuated. By the evening of May the 30th considerable numbers of troops had already reached England, with the assistance of the Royal Navy, and screened by the Royal Air Force. There is no more difficult military operation than the evacuation of an army which is in contact with a strong and active enemy. It is impossible to carry it out without very heavy

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losses, unless the completest discipline obtains among all concerned, and there is perfect collaboration between the three services. When therefore the German communiqué said 'the British troops are in headlong flight to the coast' it was making a statement which the facts disproved. If they had done so, nothing could have saved them. It was clear to all the world that the results proceeded from their natural causes. As the area about Dunkirk shrank the men fought with the same imperturbable coolness and fell back only when ordered. They were attacked by armoured divisions, by artillery, by infantry and by bombers. They took it all in the day's work, improvised the reply to all and sundry attacks and so redeemed a situation that seemed lost. At times the line threatened to break under the attack of heavy tanks when someone commandeered a light piece of artillery and broke it up with point blank shots.

So steady and so fierce was the resistance that the number evacuated increased daily. By the last day of May a short line of defence, which the British called the 'Corunna Line', had been improvised to hold the enemy off Dunkirk. The flooded Gravelines area formed a strong and forbidding flank on the south-west, as did the Yser inundations on the north-west. With these helps the number of troops, French as well as British, was greater than ever that day. The Frenchmen came mainly from the army of General Prioux, who had cut their way through from the south and monopolized the attention of a considerable number of Germans in so doing. The commander himself was captured, but a considerable proportion of his men who had pushed up past Cassel, then in German hands, escaped.

General Gort returned to England on June the 1st, and everyone understood this to mean that the evacuation, which had been proceeding day and night, was by that time

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nearing the end. The Germans were still encroaching on the narrow area within the 'Corunna Line'; but on the night of June the 2nd, Mr. Eden, the Secretary of State for War, announced in a broadcast speech that four-fifths of the British Expeditionary Force had been saved. Towards the end the majority of troops withdrawn were French. The depth of the defence was now so shallow that the beaches of Malo and Dunkirk were under artillery fire. The garrison shrank with the increasing withdrawals and the camp became more difficult to hold. Bergues fell on June the 3rd, but that night the evacuation was complete. When the Prime Minister spoke in Parliament on Tuesday, June the 4th, he was able to announce that 335,000 men had been evacuated to British ports alone. Many French troops had been taken to French ports.

This extraordinary feat deserved the enthusiastic reception given it all over the world, outside enemy countries. It was an epic achievement and volumes might be written about the almost innumerable deeds of heroism. Of one part of the evacuation something must be said. The operation would have been impossible without the daring and versatile ability of the British and French navies; but it could never have been accomplished by the navies alone. From first to last 222 British naval vessels were involved; of them 6 destroyers and 24 minor war vessels were lost. But besides this, 665 other British craft of all sorts and sizes took part in the operation, without counting French naval and merchant ships. The Admiralty described it as 'the most extensive and difficult combined operation in naval history'; and that cold description ignores the whole of its amazing quality. The assembly of this fleet of small merchant ships was the work of volunteers. Fishermen, yachtsmen, yacht-builders, yacht clubs, river boatmen manned

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their craft with volunteer crews and rushed them to the assembly point. The shallowness of the Dunkirk beach necessitated the use of small boats and lighters to take off the troops; and the most extraordinary assembly of small fry ever collected made journey after journey across waters which were covered almost continuously by enemy bombers. Some of the biggest journeys had therefore to be reserved for night-time. Towards the end, the beaches were under shell fire.

It was the British Navy which covered and protected this motley brood. It acted as a concentrated assembly of anti-aircraft guns. It held off enemy artillery concentrations. It made sure that there should be no interference by sea. The operations were carried out in shallow waters, narrow channels and strong tides. Bad seamanship, a momentary mistake, might have blocked a channel and put it out of use. Sometimes the winds raised boisterous waves which made dangerous problems for the small boats. That the operation was carried out so successfully is a tribute not only to British naval efficiency and British sea power but also to the characteristic imperturbable handiness of the normal Briton.

The profit and loss account of this transaction should take account of this exhibition of remarkable *morale* and its implications. 'If the Germany Army and Air Force could not succeed in an attack on a single point like Dunkirk,' said General Smuts later on, 'how could they succeed in their attack against Britain?' The Navy brought off no fewer than 335,000 men in six days. On the other hand there were 30,000 British killed, wounded and missing and the immense loss of all equipment of the Expeditionary Force in the north. The losses of France were much higher still. The Allies had suffered a terrible disaster. The magnificent episode of Dunkirk could not offset that, though it

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threw upon it some warm redeeming light. Up to this point the hero of the war was the internal combustion engine. At Dunkirk the stout heart and resolute will came to their own as, in the end, they ever will.

But one side of the account has not yet been represented. Germany has clearly gained much but she has paid a great deal. On June the 4th she announced her losses as 10,252 killed, 8,463 missing and 42,523 wounded! She announced also that she had lost 432 aeroplanes. It has already been pointed out that, some time before, one of the German propaganda officials had assured his hearers that the German losses had not been so great as those in the Battle of the Somme. Now in view of these later figures it is clearly ridiculous to introduce the question of the Somme casualties, which were 200,000 or 400,000 according to whether it was the 1918 or 1916 battle. So it is reasonable to ignore this German communiqué on the night of June the 4th, or to conclude that it represents the casualties of a single German Army over some given period. The German mind preserves these strange little loyalties to truth while it thinks nothing of wholesale betrayal.

A British estimate of the German casualties in the campaign in the west was between 400,000 and 500,000. In France and Belgium, at least eight picked German divisions had appeared, including eight to ten armoured divisions and a number of light motorized divisions. It was reckoned that not half but more than a third of the armoured divisions were put out of action. A few days before the completion of the evacuation, France published a return of German losses in the air admitted by the Reich Air Ministry. From the beginning of the offensive against Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg up to May the 17th the losses were put at 1,060 planes, and of personnel, in the same period,

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1,522 killed, wounded and missing. It was estimated that there had been a further similar loss of aeroplanes since May the 17th, and, if the casualties among personnel were lower, owing to some pilots escaping by parachute, the loss of 'planes during the period of the offensive might well be about 2,000 and at least 3,000 men.

These are not small figures and they resemble the more moderate estimates of the Allies. If they were somewhere near the truth, the loss of personnel in the Army and Air Force was high. Aeroplanes can be replaced, cadres filled up; but trained pilots and infantry cannot be a matter of mass production. Yet on June the 4th the German Staff were in possession of the whole of France north of the Somme, and this included the bulk of its industrial area. They had at least got rid of the Belgian Army, three great French Armies and the British Expeditionary Force. There was some excuse for Germany growing lyrical in praise of her victory. For the Allies, June the 4th marked the relief at the salvage of more of her forces than they had dared to hope. On the Somme, Oise and Aisne lay the bulk of the Allied Armies; and on the following day Germany, resuming the offensive, advanced against them.

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